

YOUTH IN PHILANTHROPY: ADULT ADVISORS SCREENING CHECKLIST

Every organization working with children, youth or other vulnerable persons has a “duty of care” that requires them to take reasonable measures to protect and care for those participating in their programs. This legal and moral obligation applies to both volunteers and paid staff, and should be seen as part of the organization’s approach to due diligence and risk management, and be incorporated into policies, guidelines and practice.

Community foundations having youth advisory committees are no exception. They will want to ensure that their policies address volunteer and/or staff screening, orientation, training and supervision, and that their practices adhere to these policies. Foundation boards should be aware of the following basic considerations, and be prepared to refer to more detailed information and guidelines available from other sources, some of which are listed here.

- ✓ **Job description:** A description of the volunteer or staff position should include clearly defined responsibilities and expectations. Reference should also be made to adherence to organizational principles, values and/or code of ethics, and code of conduct.
- ✓ **Recruitment and application process:** Whether through volunteer centers, newspaper ads or word-of-mouth, recruitment information should indicate that screening is part of the application and approval process. The application form should be sufficiently detailed to provide contact information, personal and professional references, and should request permission for other relevant screening measures, including police records check, driver’s record check and insurance coverage.
- ✓ **Interview:** In addition to ensuring that the candidate fulfills the requirements of the position, and is a fit with the organization, the interview should provide the opportunity to explain the screening process.
- ✓ **Reference checks:** When done properly, reference checks may be the most effective screening step in the hiring process. Obtain sufficient information regarding the reference’s role and relationship to the applicant, as well as permission (in writing) to contact them. Verify you are speaking to the correct person. Use a prepared set of questions to elicit the information required about the candidate’s strengths, weaknesses, reliability, character, qualifications and suitability for the position, and leave an opportunity for unsolicited comments. Listen “between the lines” and pay attention to the reference’s attitude and tone. Check with more than one reference.

- ✓ **Police Record Checks:** Once the applicant has given written permission or signed a release form for a Police Record Check (PRC), he or she should be provided with a personalized letter from the organization for a PRC. The applicant takes the letter to the police jurisdiction where they live, rather than where the organization is located. Many police departments waive the fee for non-profit organizations, although this may vary depending on the department or municipal policy. In most cases, the results of the PRC are released directly to the organization.

The basic PRC will provide limited information as to whether an individual has been charged with or convicted of a criminal offense, and depending on the department and the database(s) it searches, may also provide suspect data, probation, related court orders and/or information regarding the individual as a complainant, victim or witness. Information provided by PRCs may be limited depending on whether an offense was pardoned, committed by a youth while protected by the Young Offenders' Act, committed in another country, or so recent it has not yet been entered in the database. To address some of these limitations, varying degrees of police information may be requested beyond the basic PRC. The level of the information requested should be determined by the risk associated with the position and the tasks to be performed. For example, will the applicant's interactions with youth be confined to a group setting? Will they be involved in out-of-town or overnight trips? Although it won't entirely eliminate risk, requesting the second level of a PRC where warranted can help an organization fulfill its "duty of care".

- ✓ **Orientation and training:** A period for orientation and training provides an opportunity to ensure that the individual, the position and the organization are right for each other, and the applicant should be considered "on probation" during this time. In addition to training regarding the duties of the position, the individual must be oriented to the organization's policies and procedures. An investment in appropriate training early on can result in better job performance, more knowledgeable and dedicated volunteers and/or staff, increased job satisfaction, and safe environments.
- ✓ **Supervision and performance evaluation:** The nature and degree of supervision and evaluation will be determined by the position and the degree of risk associated with it. Observing the volunteer or employee at work, and providing feedback on job performance is an important part of the monitoring and accountability process. Communication should work both ways, and the volunteer or employee should be invited to comment on their work and performance, as well as other areas relevant to their responsibilities. In addition, follow-up with program participants and/or their families can be an effective component of the monitoring process. This may be a system of regular contact and/or random spot-checks, and can provide valuable insights into how participants are feeling about their program experiences, including the way they are treated.

In implementing such measures, creating a paper trail is an important part of the process. If something goes wrong, the organization will need to be able to document and demonstrate what they did to screen people. Everything from a written assessment of the risks involved with a position, to documented times and dates of spot checks should be part of the record.

It is also important to balance the needs of the organization for screening with the rights of the staff member or volunteer to their privacy. Thus, screening should fit the job. For example, driver records checks are only appropriate if the position includes driving.

Insurance Considerations:

Other risk management measures will include ensuring appropriate insurance coverage. Directors' and Officers' Liability Insurance is important in minimizing director's personal liability for claims arising from volunteer or staff activities undertaken in the name of the organization. In addition, individuals whose responsibilities include driving youth volunteers to events or meetings will need to ensure appropriate auto insurance coverage. However, insurance coverage only protects the individual if they act reasonably and prudently, and therefore it is important that a good screening process be undertaken in selecting those who will be entrusted with driving for the organization. Detailed information regarding types and amounts of coverage should be obtained from a local insurance broker, as requirements will vary according to jurisdictions and specific situations.

In conclusion...

Developing good policies and practice related to volunteers and staff working with youth, and ensuring their consistent application is an important element of an organization's requirement to exercise due diligence in carrying out its activities. And not only will it help to minimize risk and liability, but it will also let potential volunteers and staff know that it is serious about its duty of care. Being clear about screening can help to ensure there are no surprises for staff or volunteers, and may also cause unsuitable applicants to screen themselves out. Although implementation of the actions outlined will not guarantee the safety of all program participants, they will go a long way to creating and maintaining a safe environment and minimizing risk.

Additional Information and Resources:

- ❖ Volunteer Canada's website www.volunteer.ca
 - *"Safe Steps: A Volunteer Screening Process"* is a 73 page guide and workbook detailing a 10 step screening process and including worksheets and sample forms.
 - *"Understanding Police Records Checks"* is an RCMP brochure about police records checks.
 - *"Developing Volunteer Screening Policies"* provides a selection of screening policy samples, procedures and guidelines, along with considerations for writing your own policies.
 - *"Provincial Laws and Screening"* discusses common law and provincial legislation in general, as well as providing detail on legislation in each province. (36 pages)
 - *"Duty of Care"* a video available for purchase (\$15.00), gives a good introduction to an organization's responsibilities for its clients.

- ❖ The Canadian book, "Beyond Police Checks" by Linda Graff is an excellent source of information on the topic of screening.

- ❖ Local volunteer centres, police departments or RCMP detachments may supply forms and provide information pertaining to the local jurisdiction.

- ❖ The Nonprofit Risk Management Center also sells some good resources: www.nonprofitrisk.org