

ABOUT Screening Volunteers

This information is taken from Mentor, www.mentor.org, as there are several references to mentors. In most cases the word “mentor” can be substituted with volunteer. Most of this information will be very applicable to all volunteers and volunteer coordinators. Screening of volunteers is very important, especially when working with vulnerable populations. Please consider your screening process and how it can be improved.

Components of Volunteer Screening

There are five basic elements for screening volunteers:

- Written application;
- Fingerprint criminal background checks and related checks;
- Character reference checks;
- Face-to-face interview; and
- Participation in pre-match training.

But before you begin screening volunteers, your organization should develop a written policy documenting your volunteer screening process. This policy should include a list of screening elements that each prospective volunteer must complete, guidelines for selecting or disqualifying volunteers and clear instructions on interpreting a criminal history check. You should also keep in mind that information gathered through the screening process should be kept confidential. Also, always document what you find during the screening process and what decisions you make about the volunteer. This documentation verifies that your program followed your written screening policies on each prospective mentor.

Criminal background checks are critical, but they are only one element of a careful screening process. A robust system of reference checks and interviews of potential volunteers, evaluation of risk, and ongoing monitoring should also be a part of your organization’s regular procedures.

Select a Criminal Background Check

The criminal background check system in the U.S. is complicated. Each state is the “gatekeeper” for background checks—they decide who can access background checks and for what purpose. Each state sets its own laws on background checks, which means there is no consistency from state to state on eligibility, process, cost and turnaround time. In many states, the most thorough types of background checks may not be accessible to all mentoring organizations. Check with your state to find out what options are available to your program.

It can be very confusing for a mentoring program staff person to sort through the types of background checks that are available and decide what is the best. There are several different kinds of criminal background checks available today—each with its own pros and cons. There is no single criminal database in this country that includes every criminal record, so there is no “perfect” background check. Because of this, many organizations use a combination of two or three types of checks to get the most complete information.

Fingerprint-based vs. name-based

A name-based check uses a person's name and Social Security number to match any possible criminal records.

There are several weaknesses with a name-based check:

- The volunteer could provide you with a false name and Social Security number. In fact, over 1% of the 45 million individuals in the FBI criminal database have used over 100 aliases and false Social Security numbers.
- Female volunteers may have two or more different last names if they have been married one or more times. If you only check their current name, you can miss criminal records.
- Criminal databases can have mistakes in the spelling of an individual's name and other relevant information. A name-based check might miss a criminal record if the record itself has mistakes.
- Due to common names, you can get "false positives" -- in other words, your volunteer comes back with criminal records, but they actually belong to another individual with the same or similar name.

A fingerprint-based check is the only way to verify a person's identity, and to ensure that the criminal records found are for the right person. However, in many states, fingerprint checks are not available to mentoring organizations.

County/Local Checks

Background checks of a county or local jurisdiction can be obtained through the local police department. These checks only include crimes committed within that jurisdiction. Conducting a county search is better than doing no background check at all, but there are weaknesses. People are very mobile in today's society. Not only do they move around a lot, but many people work in a different county than where they live. In metropolitan areas with multiple counties in a small area, an individual may pass through three or four counties in the course of a day's activities. People take vacations and business trips or serve military duty in different counties and states than where they live. Plus, if you check the counties where your volunteer has lived over the past three to five years, you are relying on the volunteer to be truthful about their past residences. Use county or local searches with great caution because you will miss any criminal offenses committed in other jurisdictions.

State Background Checks

These background checks are obtained through a state agency (which agency it is varies from state to state). These checks include only the crimes committed within that state, so the same limitations in a county check also apply to a state check. In addition, costs and response times vary widely from state to state. Some states do allow fingerprint-based checks, some only allow name-based checks, and some offer both types for different fees. Most state checks also include arrests, but a few include only convictions. A list of state criminal history record repositories is online.

Private Vendor Checks

Dozens of private vendors advertise their ability to conduct criminal background checks. The costs, response times and quality of these checks vary widely from company to company. Private background checks are generally name-based and often only access convictions, not arrests.

Private vendors use two basic methods to provide background checks. Some search county record repositories for the volunteer's county of residence for the past three to five years. This has the exact same drawbacks as a county search. Other vendors maintain databases of criminal records, often searchable online. Some of these vendors advertise their background checks as national in scope. In actuality, these databases are really only "multi-state." These vendors buy their criminal data from individual states. But because many states have strong privacy laws, they do not sell any criminal data. Other states only sell a portion of their data (for example, parole records – but not the full conviction or arrest files). This means that when you run a search through a private vendor, you are accessing complete records from a few states, partial records from many states and no records from many states.

When using a private vendor check, try to find out as much information as you can about what method they use to conduct the background check and what data is accessed.

FBI Checks

The FBI maintains the most complete criminal database in the United States. It contains over 200 million arrest and conviction records concerning over 45 million individuals. All records are fingerprint-based. Five to seven thousand new individuals are added to the FBI database every day after they are arrested for the first time. The database is made up of all federal crimes plus approximately 70 to 90 percent of each state's criminal databases. Low-level misdemeanors and citations make up the portion of state records that are generally not present in the FBI database. Because of this, programs that use an FBI check may wish to supplement it with a driver's license check or a state background check to access the low-level misdemeanors and citations that may not be present in the FBI database.

To obtain an FBI check, you must go through your state background check agency. But, many states have strict eligibility requirements for FBI checks, and mentoring organizations often don't qualify. When FBI checks are accessible, they may be very costly or have a lengthy turnaround time. .

Other Background Check Options

Many mentoring programs conduct other types of checks to supplement their criminal background checks. Examples include:

DMV check

Provides information about an individual's license records, including license convictions, reportable accidents, license expirations, suspensions or revocations, license restorations, DUIs and point/insurance reduction completion. Depending on state rules and regulations the prospective volunteer may need to submit the check instead of the organization. A list of state DMVs is available online.

State sex offender registries

Most states now have sex offender registries available online, making it easy to search several states for an individual. Any crimes that would cause an individual to be on a sex offender registry should show up in a state or FBI criminal background check, but this is a good "double check." However, sex offender registries are NOT reliable as the only method of doing a background check as they rely on the criminal to update the registries when they move. So, they are usually very dated. A list of state sex offender registries is available online.

Child abuse registries

A few states will allow organizations that work with children to check an individual against the child abuse registry. These databases often include complaints of abuse that never result in arrest or prosecution and so would not be in a criminal database. Try contacting your state's department of child welfare to see if the child abuse registry is accessible.

MENTOR strongly recommends that your program conduct criminal background checks for all volunteers. At the same time, criminal background checks are no substitute for personal reference checks and a face-to-face interview. An interview can give you solid clues as to whether your applicant has the qualities to make a good mentor; qualities, such as patience, flexibility, commitment and an open mind. Only by asking for and then checking with individual personal references will you get a more complete picture of the applicant.

Conducting Face-to-Face Interviews

Review and discuss the mentor position description with candidates to ensure they understand program expectations. Know what questions you want to ask prior to the interview. Explore not only the personal attributes you'll require, but the practical expectations, as well. Will the mentor's daily routine leave inadequate time for a mentoring relationship? Are they close enough geographically to the meeting location so that transportation will not pose a problem? Will they be comfortable with the level of supervision you intend to provide? Provide adequate opportunity for the applicant to ask questions and provide honest, forthright answers.

Screening Mentors

Some people don't make good mentors. There are no hard and fast rules other than the obvious: criminal record, history of child abuse, etc. However, you may want to also screen out those who:

- Don't have enough time to commit to being consistent in their mentoring;
- Seem to be volunteering for status or job promotion reasons;
- Hold rigid opinions and don't seem open to new ideas;
- Seem too concerned about what a mentee can do for them;
- Want to be a mentor so they can work out problems from their own past; or
- Do not have skills that match your program's needs.

How to Say "No"

If a potential mentor exhibits any of these traits, it is best not to accept that applicant. Remember there is no legal right for interested volunteers to serve as mentors. You may want to offer the volunteer a different opportunity. (It's a good idea to be prepared with a list of volunteer assignments other than mentoring-fundraising, office work, public relations, etc.)

When you must turn down an applicant, here are some things you might say:

- "We have no mentees who would match well with you at this time..."
- "Your skills and interests don't fit our mentoring profile, but we'd like to have you involved with the program. Might I suggest some other important volunteer opportunities..."

This information is taken from MENTOR (www.mentor.org).