

Volunteer Screening: Changing Trends in Changing Times

Are your screening practices in line with other organizations? A new survey provides an in-depth view.

By Katie Zwetzig

Do you ever wonder how your organization stacks up when it comes to engaging and screening volunteers? Because trends around volunteerism constantly change, Verified Volunteers conducted a primary research study, surveying hundreds of nonprofit organizations throughout the country to gather their insights when it comes to their volunteers and how they're screening them. The resulting report reveals several key trends that could influence the way you recruit and retain your volunteers. Here's what the researchers found.

Who Volunteers, Why, & How Often?

The volunteer pool in the United States is divided almost evenly among three age groups: 35-54 year olds (33%), 18-34 year olds (28%), and those 55 and older (34%). Volunteers under 35 are most interested in volunteer roles that leverage the skills they've learned in school or in their jobs, so you may find more success if you offer "professional" volunteer opportunities to them. Other age groups are less interested in using specific skills and more willing to volunteer in whatever way the community needs.

According to the survey respondents, 61% of their volunteers return frequently to assist the same organization. These frequent volunteers contribute an average of 29 hours per month, and 2.5% dedicate more than 40 hours per month. These are positive statistics that have a lot to do with the sample of survey respondents. Most of the surveyed organizations rely heavily on volunteers to help them fulfill their missions—not all nonprofit organizations do. Because they follow such a volunteer-driven model, these organizations have likely defined very clear volunteer roles and created systems to maintain that level of intensity—from recruiting, to placement, to ongoing training. What does this mean? Survey respondents may be benefitting from a higher proportion of frequent volunteers than the majority of volunteer organizations in the country.

Indeed, many nonprofits report that more and more people are unable to make a high level of commitment to a cause. It's more

important than ever for nonprofits to be creative in finding ways to engage busy people and flexible in accommodating their schedules.

Screening Is Imperative.

Screening is no longer a "nice to have"; it's the norm among volunteer organizations. The top reasons volunteer organizations screen their volunteers are consistent: 88% want to ensure a safe and secure environment; 85% want to protect their constituents and vulnerable populations; 78% want to safeguard the organization's reputation.

Not too long ago, it was primarily the mentoring sector, or those working with vulnerable populations, who thought they needed to screen. Now, 57.4% of organizations conduct background checks on all volunteers before bringing them on board.

On the flip side, 42% of organizations are still screening just *some* volunteers, which is a mammoth risk. When you don't screen *all* volunteers, you're risking your assets and reputation as well as your people and their safety. You can become the victim of fraud or theft, find yourself on the wrong side of a lawsuit, or see your ability to raise funds and qualify for grants dwindle. Organizations that continue to screen only a portion of their volunteers should reconsider their policies and think through what they're risking if they don't put a more comprehensive screening program in place.

Consider Outsourcing.

Nearly 7 in 10 organizations outsource screening to third-party providers who are experts on hiring and screening and can process background checks more quickly and with a greater level of accuracy than volunteer managers can do in-house. Using in-house resources or going directly to a government source can leave organizations on the hook for lawsuits should they fail to follow one of the many changing regulations and laws around screening. Plus, if volunteer managers are running the checks themselves, they likely aren't getting the most comprehensive, robust, and up-to-date screen possible.

Multiple Checks Are Now the Rule.

Most organizations now realize that no single screen or search is complete. Each one—conducted alone—has many gaps. This is true of even the FBI's National Crime Information Center. A truly comprehensive check must consist of several

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searches layered on top of one another in order to fill as many of the gaps as possible.

Based on this research study, each organization now uses four different types of background checks. Nine in 10 organizations conduct criminal record checks; 86% use a sex offender search; and over half use an identity verification check.

There are Still Misperceptions.

There is still confusion about some aspects of screening. Nationwide or multistate databases arguably cause the most bewilderment. A third of organizations have never heard of nationwide database searches. But, because the name sounds so inclusive, most agree that they must be accurate, up-to-date, and thorough.

Unfortunately, perception doesn’t always match reality. There are many instant nationwide and multistate database searches available, but none of them can provide a comprehensive criminal record check. Nationwide database searches are valuable when used as one component of a criminal record check as they can help identify crimes that occur outside of the volunteer’s residential jurisdiction, but all hits found as part of a nationwide or multistate database search must be validated at the primary source of information (the county or state courthouse).

Fingerprinting, as a comprehensive screening tool, is also widely misunderstood. Contrary to popular belief, fingerprinting isn’t the most reliable criminal record check. Fingerprint checks rely on a contributory database, which may be outdated and unreliable.

So who should be fingerprinted? If it’s required in a given state or by another governing body, an organization must fingerprint. If it’s not required, it’s best to use a more reliable name-based check. Fingerprinting is expensive, time consuming, and doesn’t leave you with a complete or accurate picture.

Top Trends

The survey asked respondents their plans for their screening programs. Their top four intentions are:

- **Screen** more volunteers.
- **Improve** integration between screening and other tools.
- **Perform** rescreening.
- **Add** new searches.

These are encouraging trends that will lead to safer, more progressive volunteer programs across the country.

Katie Zwetzig is executive director of Verified Volunteers (www.verifiedvolunteers.com, info@verifiedvolunteers.com), which produced the “Verified Volunteers Volunteer Screening Trends & Best Practices Report” (<http://info.sterlingbackcheck.com/ReportPR>), including responses from 352 nonprofit professionals.

Reduce the Risks of Involving Volunteers

For more on creating a dynamic volunteer program while keeping everyone safe and avoiding lawsuits, see these articles at www.NonprofitWorld.org/members:

Volunteer Protection Act: What Does It Mean for You? (Vol. 16, No. 2)

Common-Sense Answers about Volunteer Involvement (Vol. 34, No. 1)

New Trends in Volunteering – and How to Tap into Them (Vol. 30, No. 2)

What Is the Board’s Role in Managing Risk? (Vol. 15, No. 5)

Foreseeable Harm (Vol. 20, No. 3)

Volunteers: Resource or Risk? (Vol. 15, No. 5)

Setting the Stage for an Abuse-Free Organization (Vol. 30, No. 6)