

Trust: The Reason Volunteer Screening Is More Vital than Ever

Background checks have always been crucial: They're even more so today.

By Tammy Cohen

Twenty-five years ago, a handshake was usually the gesture that conveyed trust between a nonprofit and volunteer. The volunteer was trusted to be a good person with no ill will towards the organization's cause or clients, and the nonprofit was there to fill a great need for individuals who weren't able to assist or advocate on their own behalf.

The Boy Scouts' handshake with the left hand is explained in different ways, but one account is that a Ashanti chief in West Africa said, "In our land, only the bravest of the brave shake hands with the left hand because to do so we must drop our shields and our protection." Others say the reason is that the left hand is closer than the right hand to your heart. Whatever the meaning, the handshake represented trust between two parties.

Nonprofits often trust volunteers because the need is so great and resources so low. However, that level of trust can be dangerous. Too much trust can be disastrous. Every volunteer may not be acting altruistically, and not all have the organization's well-being in mind.

A survey by the National Center for Victims of Crime (victimsofcrime.org) found:

- The majority of organizations report they would disqualify any volunteer who has been arrested or convicted of a crime.
- The majority of organizations would disqualify a volunteer for a child abuse or elder abuse report.
- Nearly half of the organizations believe that screening will identify a volunteer who would be an "inappropriate" match.

And yet:

- 12% of organizations report that they don't screen volunteers.

Most members of the public would be appalled to learn that even one nonprofit organization hired any volunteers without screening them first. There is a social awareness of the evil that could exist in a few volunteers, and even though the numbers are minuscule, one is too many for any organization. And the safety and well-being of other volunteers is often just as much at risk as that of clients. Not only does this compound the problem, but it elevates the seriousness of not doing a background check.



The public's trust of nonprofits in general has eroded in recent years. Members of the public are increasingly concerned that sex offenders or violent criminals may be among the volunteer corps. And now, more and more, they're also worried that the nonprofit may be in the business of financial gain and not for the cause.

Today, more than ever, a nonprofit has to protect and manage its brand. Brand awareness is the lifeblood of fundraising. The publicity of just one incident in which a nonprofit didn't screen its employees and volunteers, or didn't understand the right types of background checks to ensure maximum protection, can destroy the trust that clients, volunteers, and donors have in all nonprofit organizations. **S**

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