



Setting the Stage for an Abuse-Free Organization

By Jack Roche

The right risk-management program can help you protect your organization's clients, employees, and reputation.

When abuse occurs in a nonprofit organization, the results can be catastrophic. The nonprofit's reputation is often ruined, and a lawsuit can drain the organization's resources.

“Never take shortcuts or make exceptions.”

Consider the nonprofit that failed to run a background check on a tutor who was later accused of raping an eight-year old girl. According to the executive director, a request for a background check was submitted, but because of an error in the administration office, it was never forwarded to the appropriate state office and thus never completed. The organization is now managing all the troubling consequences, and has been named in a lawsuit filed by the victim's family.

Although there's no foolproof way to identify potential abusers, there are some proven ways to minimize risks.

Screen everyone — even if you or others in the organization know the job candidate personally. When it comes to the screening process, never take shortcuts or make exceptions.

Establish policies and procedures on staff-client interactions, whether these interactions take place at work or outside the office. Be sure these policies and procedures clearly address issues of client abuse and employee conduct. Communicate them to everyone in the organization.

Send the message that protecting clients and staff from abuse

is a high priority. Relay this message during the job application, review, and interview process.

“Following these steps is the best way to mitigate risk.”

For example, before candidates complete an application, ask them to read your organization's policies on abuse and employee conduct. Then have them sign a statement that they understand the policies and, if hired, will adhere to them.

Require all job candidates to sign a release permitting a criminal background check. Give them a statement explaining what information, if discovered, will disqualify them. Provide them with the organization's policies on confidentiality and information security.

Conduct background checks early on. The form for a criminal background check should require the job candidate to list all current and past residential addresses.


Most states will conduct free background checks for human service organizations. A 50-state background check must also be a part of the routine screening process. A national background check may be costly, but it will pay for itself many times over if just one potential abuser is identified, or discouraged from moving forward with the hiring process.

After candidates clear local and national background checks, ask them to complete a full job application form, one that documents all former employers. Address any gaps in employment in the interview stage.

In addition, ask candidates to list the names (and contact information) of past supervisors. When checking references, follow up to ensure that the person is indeed a supervisor and not a co-worker, friend, or acquaintance.

Ask the right questions. Everyone who interviews candidates should be formally trained in interview techniques, including methods to screen for potential abuse issues. A standard set of core interview questions helps create consistency.

Candidates should be interviewed by several people. When the process is complete, staff members who participated should compare their impressions and findings. Any deviations or inconsistencies from one interview to the next should be seen as a red flag that prompts follow-up action or inquiry.

Find good risk control insurance. Following the above steps is the best way to mitigate risk. But no matter how conscientious you are, some risks will still exist. That's why it's also important to have the right insurance coverage in case something does go wrong. 

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“A background check will pay for itself many times over.”

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