

Safe Volunteers: Effective Screening Techniques to Minimize the Risk of Abuse by Volunteers

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INTRODUCTION

Faced with limited resources and the multiple challenges of recruiting, screening, training and supervising volunteers, volunteer coordinators must pay special attention to factors that may affect the safety of clients paired with the agency's volunteers. The purpose of this article is to offer a few suggestions that could be implemented in screening and interviewing volunteers without significantly increasing costs or staff time appreciably yet provide accountability for the agency and protection for vulnerable clients.

SCREENING

Most states in the United States require that employees working with vulnerable populations (children, the developmentally disabled, the elderly) provide fingerprints that are compared with a state-wide registry of convicted sex offenders and sign statements indicating awareness of and willingness to comply with laws that mandate reporting of suspected abuse and neglect. Fingerprinting attempts to prevent giving access to and responsibility for potential victims to known abusers; the signed statement aims to ensure that signs of abuse or neglect will be reported promptly so that those in need of protection and assistance receive such services expeditiously.

Despite widespread compliance in America by agencies with their paid staff, unfortunately few United States organizations require fingerprinting and report-

ing agreements of volunteers. However, requiring volunteers to comply with employee standards reflects a level of responsible behavior expected of all those affiliated with the agency. It may also deter or discourage those looking for opportunity to take advantage of clients. Moreover, implementing these procedures requires minimal additional time and expense by paid staff yet provides a considerable measure of protection and safety to those served. Additionally, both members of boards of directors and donors are likely to be persuaded of the commitment and integrity of programs implementing such safeguards.

In Canada, volunteers and staff have the same requirements for fingerprinting and reporting. The volunteer must initiate a police check and share the result with the volunteer coordinator. Failure to submit a completed police check means that the volunteer will not be placed with a client. In other countries, volunteer coordinators should investigate what checks are available and apply the same standards to staff and volunteers in the interests of the safety of their clients and the integrity of their programs.

The request for fingerprints should be presented as the agency's commitment to provide safe and responsible services to clients. By meeting the standards of paid employees, volunteers can expect to be treated with respect and responsibility comparable to paid staff. Equal standards provide an environment that is mutually

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desirable and effective. The screener will, however, need to present the request with sensitivity and tact. One might say, for example,

We value the work of our volunteers as we do our staff. We are committed to providing services of high quality to our clients, assuring them of a level of skill, responsibility and safety when they are with us. To that end, we ask that volunteers follow the same procedures required by law of paid staff. We ask you to submit a set of fingerprints for screening and to sign a statement of compliance with the laws involving the reporting of abuse and neglect. We are eager to welcome you as a volunteer and trust that you share our commitment to assure our clients that their safety and care are our highest priorities.

INTERVIEWING

Interviewing provides an opportunity for the volunteer coordinator to encourage the prospective volunteer's enthusiasm for the agency's various programs, to assess the skills and interests of the candidate, and to screen out or redirect away those people who would not be good matches for direct service programs. Assessing maturity, judgment, appropriateness, limits and boundaries, therefore, is an integral part of volunteer screening. In addition to telling the applicant about the agency's programs, the screener might also ask several questions that would give a sense of how the prospective volunteer would likely behave in unstructured settings and how he/she might handle requests for favors or special assistance (both appropriate and inappropriate) from clients.

Here are several questions that, modified to fit the specifics of each program, might be useful in eliciting information about the candidate's judgment and boundaries in a courteous and respectful manner. They should follow the informational exchange if the screener and the

prospective volunteer are both still eager to have the candidate become part of the program. These questions are deliberately open-ended and seek a projective response. While this approach has the disadvantage of requiring some interpretation, it avoids the drawback of more structured questions which suggest the interests and answers of the interviewer. It is too easy to give "good" answers to specific questions.

The screener might ask:

1. "In some ways (specific to the program) you may be perceived as a sort of friend by the client. To give me a sense of this side of you, could you tell me an anecdote about a friendship?"

Absent a recent death, divorce or similarly ominous life event, the applicant should volunteer a recent and relatively casual and benign story involving a peer. Intensity should be minimal, reflecting the level of conversation between the candidate and the interviewer. If the candidate has to go back twenty years to tell about a high school friendship, it may mean that he/she currently lives an isolated life and may bring too many needs for companionship to the volunteer position. If the candidate tells of a story with someone much older or younger than him/herself, perhaps he/she has difficulty establishing friendships with peers. A deeply emotional or dramatic story is inconsistent with the tenor of the conversation and unlikely with the expected role the volunteer would assume in the program.

2. "Would you give me an anecdote involving a child, elder, or handicapped person?" (The interviewer should select someone similar to the types of clients the agency serves.)

Again, absent recent traumatic events in such a relationship, the proffered anecdote should match the conversational tone in style and intensity. Needs to rescue or save, overinvolvement, desires to effect enormous change in the other's life might be disclosed, and are cause for

concern if the candidate should be matched with a client.

3. "Since the task is very demanding and sometimes overwhelming, could you tell me how you tend to handle affection, discipline and setting limits? How were these things handled in your family when you were growing up?"

These questions do not intend to imply that people from abusive or negligent backgrounds should not be allowed to volunteer. Rather, they suggest that people need to be aware of their likely first reactions in times of stress or surprise. Further, they allow the candidate to show what he/she learned in childhood and how he/she has incorporated and modified those lessons as an adult.

Specific answers to any of these questions should not necessarily screen anybody in or out of a given program. Rather they should be used to give a sense of the person's interpersonal style, ability to set and honor boundaries, and capacity to make responsible decisions when faced with potentially difficult, upsetting and emotionally charged situations. Inappro-

priate answers, in either affect or content, should raise serious concerns that would lead to a more thorough assessment of the candidate's suitability for work with potentially vulnerable clients.

CONCLUSION

The suggestions offered above are intended not as assurance that no inadequate or predatory volunteer will be selected, but rather as guidance for responsible recruiting and screening practices. They provide basic safeguards for potentially vulnerable clients, clearly define to staff and volunteers alike at the outset the level of responsible behavior required of all affiliated with the program, and assure members of boards of directors and donors that risk will be minimized. Volunteer coordinators can easily incorporate these standards and inquiries in diverse settings since they require minimal additional time and expense, the only direct cost being the nominal fee charged for screening fingerprints. A practical approach that recognizes and seeks to limit risk shows ethical awareness and concern. Such standards should be the hallmark of all reputable volunteer programs.