

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

NEWS

Charities Find Ways to Screen Volunteers Despite Insufficient Funds, Time

VOLUNTEERISM

By Sandy Asirvatham

AUGUST 8, 2002

Streetcats Foundation for Youth never lacks for willing volunteers. "For all our national projects, we get a ton of people wanting to volunteer every single day," says Don Fass, the charity's leader. The organization, in Oakland, Calif., runs a number of child- and youth-oriented programs, and relies on adult volunteers to help run some of them, such as Teen-Anon, a counseling program for adolescent substance abusers. The adults who lead these counseling groups may already work with kids in their day jobs -- for example, as school counselors -- and are sometimes enrolled in other 12-step programs to manage their own substance-abuse issues, Mr. Fass says.

Despite the sensitive nature of the foundation's work and the vulnerability of the charity's clients, he says, the group does not check its volunteers' backgrounds beyond calling their references. Streetcats lacks sufficient resources to screen, train, and coordinate more than a few of the 10 or so candidates who apply for volunteer assignments each day, Mr. Fass says, and rarely is able to check their employment histories or search for possible criminal records. Grant makers, he says, are reluctant to cover the costs the organization would incur to make more thorough screening and training possible.

Although Mr. Fass is concerned about the potential for misbehavior by volunteers who haven't been thoroughly screened, he says he is far more worried by his group's inability to fully assess each volunteer's emotional fitness for the task at hand, fearing the effects of burnout caused by the emotionally intense work. To ensure the safety of both the adult volunteers and the teenagers they serve, Streetcats provides volunteers with a great deal of initial and ongoing training and support, he says.

You have 1 free article remaining. [Subscribe](#) for unlimited access.

Managers of social-service charities generally already know what some religious leaders have recently learned the hard way: Organizations serving vulnerable populations, such as children or the disabled, must carefully screen the people who work with them to minimize the risk of harm to those in their care, harm that could include criminal acts such as physical or sexual abuse and unintentional neglect or simple insensitivity in dealing with patients or clients. Such screening not only helps protect charities' clients but also the charities themselves, which could be held liable if something goes wrong.

Although that is as true for paid employees as for volunteers, the vetting, training, and supervision of volunteers present special challenge for charities that receive more applicants than they can easily process and coordinate.

Many charities simply aren't equipped to screen all volunteers who want to donate time to them, according to Susan Ellis, president of Energize, a consulting group in Philadelphia that specializes in managing volunteers. "There's an assumption that the problem is recruitment," she says, "but the real problem is the capacity of organizations to put people to work."

In addition to a lack of resources for vetting, Ms. Ellis adds, current screening methods are often ineffectual. Criminal-record checks, for example, are generally only done in the state in which the volunteer lives, and only reveal convictions over a finite period, usually no more than the past five to seven years. Other experts note that even more comprehensive, national databases -- such as those available through the FBI or private security companies -- are not entirely foolproof.

Indeed, although such criminal checks have become routine for many charities, experts are skeptical of their worth. "Their primary value is that they are a discouragement to individuals who are looking to gain access to kids for inappropriate reasons," says John C. Patterson, senior program director at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center, in Washington. Mr. Patterson applauds efforts to make background checks more effective. For example, he cites Volunteer Select, a new program by the Atlanta security company ChoicePoint, which offers screenings to nonprofit organizations at little cost -- one package, for instance, will verify a potential volunteer's Social Security information and check for criminal and sex-offender records for \$3.50. However, he does not believe such tools are all that a charity needs to protect its clients from abuse or exploitation.



SPONSOR CONTENT | CCS Fundraising

CCS Examines Record-breaking Philanthropic Trends in Tenth-Edition Report

Contextualizing the latest research from across the field of philanthropy, the Snapshot of Today's Philanthropic Landscape provides nonprofits with the information they need to create informed fundraising strategies.

You have 1 free article remaining. [Subscribe](#) for unlimited access.

Managing Risk

Mr. Patterson says he is also concerned that criminal background checks -- which can cost up to \$100 per volunteer, depending on the jurisdictions being surveyed -- can create a false sense of security if charities depend on them as their chief screening tool. Instead, the Nonprofit Risk Management Center and other similar organizations advocate a continuous process that offers a number of opportunities to manage the various risks associated with the organization's specific mission. "Putting volunteers to work safely doesn't have to be as costly or time-consuming as you may think," says Melanie Herman, the center's executive director.

While acknowledging that screening is an important part of the process, Ms. Herman also emphasizes thoughtful program design. Organizations that hold one-day, "walk-in" volunteer events, for example, can't do any screening in that time frame, but can certainly ensure that volunteers are never left without adequate supervision and never allowed to have one-on-one contact with the clients that the charity serves, Ms. Herman says. For example, although each of its 120 local affiliates does its background checks slightly differently, says Deanne Armstrong, chief program officer at Campfire USA, the national umbrella organization for the youth-development charity provides a manual for leaders that spells out how to organize field trips and other gatherings so that children are never alone with adults.

For organizations hiring long-term volunteers who will work directly with vulnerable clients, volunteer-management experts strongly emphasize the use of reference checks to screen out potential problems.

Although some managers of volunteers admit that they usually don't have the time or resources to do more than collect reference contact information from prospective volunteers, others make a point of following up with the references. Kathryn Berry, director of volunteer services at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, in Memphis, asks volunteer candidates for contact information for two nonfamily references. The references are asked to fill out a short questionnaire covering the prospective volunteer's work habits and personality traits, and return it in a stamped, self-addressed envelope that Ms. Berry provides.

Barbara Blundell, supervisor of volunteer services at Children's Hospital, in Boston, notes that the final question she asks of references is, "Would you want this person working with your child, if he or she were in the hospital?" Ms. Blundell says references are usually candid when they answer that question, and that she has indeed turned away prospective volunteers as a result of a reference's answer.

Emotional Fitness

In designing their screening programs, organizations acknowledge that criminal behavior is only the most obvious thing that can disqualify a candidate from volunteering. Subtler issues of [psychological and](#)

Short of costly, time-consuming, and legally thorny full-scale psychological testing, managers of volunteers can learn a lot about their candidates through a substantial interview process, charity officials say. Ms. Berry says she conducts phone interviews with volunteer applicants, usually asking many of the same questions they have answered on their written applications. "I hear their voice inflection, and I ask them logistical questions" to determine which tasks would best suit the volunteers, she says.

At the Shriners Hospital in Chicago, which specializes in orthopedic and spinal-cord injury treatment for children, volunteers must be sensitive enough not to recoil from patients who may be using unfamiliar or strange-looking postoperative devices, says Elise Wachspress, the hospital's public-relations and volunteer-services specialist. Because many of its volunteers are teenagers fulfilling their school's public-service requirement, who may not yet have developed that sensitivity, Ms. Wachspress gives them a presentation about the types of conditions the hospital treats and takes them on a tour of the facilities -- not just to familiarize them with the hospital's mission, but also to gauge their responses to the patients.

Charity managers should be interested in whether volunteers' motivations are solid and appropriate, says Kathleen O'Brien, vice president of program services at the Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association, in Chicago. She finds that adult children and spouses of Alzheimer's sufferers who have died sometimes volunteer out of a sense of guilt rather than a pure notion of "giving something back."

To ensure that volunteers are motivated by positive, altruistic feelings, says Ms. O'Brien, the charity asks them to wait up to a year after their loved one's death, to allow them to fully grieve before they are assigned to work one-on-one with Alzheimer's patients.

Assigning Tasks

While waiting for the results of background and reference checks, charities can still take advantage of new volunteers' enthusiasm, says Ms. Ellis. She recommends calling all new volunteers "trainees" and giving them nonsensitive, paperwork-oriented tasks to capitalize on their energies until they are cleared for more sensitive work. Getting them involved at this low-risk level is one way to minimize the bottleneck of prospective, yet-to-be-screened volunteers, she says.

Managers of volunteers generally agree that organizations must work toward properly classifying the risks associated with various volunteer duties. Special Olympics, the umbrella organization for American and international programs for mentally retarded athletes, distinguishes three different categories for its volunteers: Class A are those that may be in close physical contact with the athletes, Class B are committee members and other administrative workers, and Class C are single-event or single-day volunteers. Screening and training procedures are designed specifically for each category.

In addition, says Dave Lenox, Special Olympics' director of athlete leadership programming, the organization has begun to put other safeguards in place: teaching its athletes self-protective behaviors, to help them understand that "no one has the right to touch you in places where you don't want to be touched, or to make you feel bad."

Although its child athletes are encouraged to protect themselves, the organization still recognizes that it is ultimately responsible for minimizing the risks that could result from reliance on adult volunteers. Special Olympics asks its coaches, or "Class A" volunteers, to help monitor athlete-volunteer interaction, training them to recognize the signs of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse. In addition to its educational function, this program is designed to be a deterrent, Mr. Lenox says. "We get this information out there at an introductory level," he says, "so that anyone who has come to the organization in a predatory mind-set will say, 'Gee, everyone's watching, I better be careful.'"

As the Special Olympics' approach illustrates, the use of rigorous, law-enforcement-style tools to screen out people who may behave inappropriately may not be as important as the creation of a safe, cooperative, and responsive environment among staff members, volunteers, and clients. Consider, as an analogy, the increase in airport security after the events of September 11, says Mr. Patterson. "I do a fair amount of traveling, and I think my shoes have been X-rayed enough times that they probably now glow in the dark," he jokes. But such measures don't really increase his sense of security, he says. "The real sense of security I get these days is the feeling that if something does happen, there are 130 people on that plane that aren't going to sit there passively and let it happen."

How does your charity screen volunteers?

ALSO SEE:

[Resources for Screening Volunteers](#)

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

You have 1 free article remaining. [Subscribe](#) for unlimited access.



How to Inspire Legacy Gifts

How to Inspire Legacy Gifts

Get smart guidance on how to identify prospective donors, promote planned gifts in sensitive and effective ways, and avoid common missteps during this September 23

[Register Now](#)



How to Convey Impact to Donors in Times of Change

How to Convey Impact to Donors in Times of Change

Join us to learn from foundation decision makers how to build a compelling case for support despite uncertainty and communicate results in ways that inspire confidence in

[Watch On Demand](#)



1255 23rd Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037
 © 2021 The Chronicle of Philanthropy

You have 1 free article remaining. [Subscribe](#) for unlimited access.