A Present Danger

Agencies Search for Ways to Screen Child Molesters

By Carol Memmott

Not long ago, a staff member at a volunteer clearinghouse was interviewing a potential volunteer when her internal warning bells went off. She had recently attended a training session designed to help identify unsuitable volunteers and this applicant sounded a lot like the child molester prototype she had learned about. He sounded so typical that she wondered if she had been sent a test case to check on her interviewing skills.

With the training session in mind, she began asking standard questions used to screen out opportunistic child molesters; the potential volunteer in turn gave all the standard answers a child molester might give. The dialogue made the interviewer very uncomfortable and trusting her instincts, the applicant was rejected.

The applicant may or may not have been a potential child molester, but Eileen Cackowski, who runs the screening workshop, stresses that volunteer screeners "should never ignore gut feelings."

"There is the chance that you may lose an excellent volunteer, and I'm very sorry if that happens," says Cackowski, "however the greater loss is in the life of the child who is molested—and that lasts a lifetime."

"Screening to Protect Vulnerable Populations" is offered by Cackowski and colleague Don Flinn through the Maryland Governor's Office on Volunteerism. The training program is not unique. As more cases of child abuse and molestation are made public, voluntary agencies nationwide are taking a much harder look at their volunteers.

"We've raised a lot of awareness," says Cackowski. "Volunteer coordinators, being part of the helping profession, don't want to think badly of anyone and so when they are doing an interview with someone and the hair on the back of their neck begins to stand up they discount it, and worse than that, accept a person into a volunteer program."

During the training, attendees observe Cackowski interviewing a "potential" volunteer. What they don't know, is that Flinn, displaying all the warning signs, is playing the role of an unacceptable volunteer. "In the role playing, Flinn comes off as the volunteer made in heaven, or the more you think about it, made in hell," says Cackowski, as he exhibits the classic characteristics of a child molester.

Results of the training are significant. "I don't think we have ever done a training when we haven't gotten feedback afterwards that someone either identified someone who was a child molester in their organization or certainly a potential molester."

Most child molesters are male; female pedophiles are rare—or at least rarely reported. Classic characteristics: He or she has done a lot of moving around; does not have a very stable background; offers no references other than perhaps the parents of children he's worked with before. "Pedophiles," says Cackowski, "tend to spend an inordinate amount of time first wooing the parents and then wooing the children. It's almost a courtship process so the parents are going to defend him."

The Dallas Volunteer Center tackled the problem several years ago when local agencies, struck by a handful of molestation cases, asked for a centralized system to help them do better screening. Since the center referred more than 75,000 potential volunteers to Dallas-area agencies in 1993, its board is convinced that screening is a service the center owes the community.

"The screening is very much a part of our mission," says Julie Thomas, director of the Dallas Volunteer Center. "If we are sending volunteers to agencies and agencies are occasionally going to develop problems like this, then we must also provide an organized, efficient solution to these problems."

In 1993, the center asked the Texas Legislature for access to criminal convictions and arrest records on volunteers and staff members who would be doing work in agencies across the state that serve vulnerable client populations.

"What we asked for was more ambitious than what we got," says Thomas. Lawmakers, concerned about civil liberties, gave the center access to criminal convictions only and limited its scope to agencies served by the Dallas

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Carol Memmott is a free-lance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.

Asking the Right Questions

The following questions are suggested by the Boys and Girls Clubs of America and adapted by John Patterson in *Staff Screening Tool Kit: Keeping the Bad Apples Out of Your Organization.*

Question: Why are you interested in this position? Be alert for someone who over-identifies with children, is unduly excited about the possibility of working with children, or who emphasizes that working with children is much easier than working with adults.

Q: How would you describe yourself? Be alert for someone who indicates shyness or is withdrawn or passive.

Q: Will you please tell me about a situation in which you were responsible for disciplining a child, other than your own? Listen for use of excessive force, denigration of the child, unrealistic expectations about children's needs or use of discipline techniques that would violate your organization's policies.

Q: What is there about children that makes you enjoy working with them? Listen for over-identification with children; for statements that young children are so easy to work with; or negative statements about teenagers or adults when compared to younger children.

Q: What is there about this position that appeals to you most? Listen for appropriate skills, qualifications, etc. Also look for high interest in one-on-one activities with children, preference for a particular age and gender of child, and idealized statements about "saving children."

Q: In what kind of supervisory style do you prefer to function? Be alert for preference to be left alone to "do their own thing." Also use this opportunity to explain the monitoring and supervision techniques used to ensure the safety of the children in the program. The applicant should understand that there will be "zero tolerance" for any form of child mistreatment within the program.

Q: What was your childhood like? This question is intended to help uncover if the applicant was subjected to abuse as a child. If the applicant was, there may be an elevated chance that he or she could be abusive. Individuals who were abused as children and who have resolved their victimization can make excellent volunteers and provide positive role models for children. Applicants who appear not to have resolved their childhood victimization should be screened out of unsupervised contact with children. ■ *—Carol Memmott*

Volunteer Center. Dallas now serves as a pilot project.

This year the center is asking the legislature once more for access for all the state's Volunteer Centers and for arrest as well as conviction records. They are also seeking judicial immunity in the event that the screening process mistakenly identifies someone as having an arrest or conviction record and the person wants to file suit. Thomas is optimistic that there's strong legislative support for this.

Since the program was put into place in April 1994, 35 Dallas area agencies, most of which work with children, are using the Volunteer Center's screening process.

It's simple yet very effective. The center still refers volunteers to targeted agencies which have a primary screening process in place. Potential volunteers fill out agency applications, provide references, are given job descriptions, read the volunteer code of ethics and are interviewed. If the candidate makes it this far, the criminal background screening is the final step. And before this happens, applicants must give written permission for the check to be done.

"Agencies tell us there's a lot of self-screening," says Thomas. "When it's time to sign the consent form, they [potential volunteers] don't reappear or they own up before the criminal check is run. Many times that's when the volunteer ducks and runs for cover," says Thomas. "The scariest thing to convicted child molesters is losing their secrecy."

Says Thomas: "Of 12,000 staff and volunteers already checked, we have a 1.9 percent hit rate where there is some type of criminal background. We know for a fact that we have nailed three child molesters."

Of course, all child molesters have not been arrested or convicted so the Volunteer Center provides agencies with skills needed to conduct thorough interviews. "If a person has a history of child molestation, they often give themselves away," says Thomas. "Interviewers are taught to trust their instincts when they sense something's just not right. It's natural for people like that to seek out youth serving agencies. Their whole life centers around getting close to children."

John Patterson of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center, Washington, D.C., has made a career out of this identification process. He is the author of the *Staff Screening Tool Kit: Keeping the Bad Apples Out of Your Organization.* Published last year, the book offers community-serving organizations advice and information on how to avoid staff and volunteers who may injure their client populations. He says organizations should be looking for volunteers they are comfortable with "and if a person sounds too good to be true, they probably are."

Patterson stresses that volunteers should always be supervised. "I don't care how great a screening process an organization has, they still have to supervise what goes on and they have to maintain contact both with the

kids in the program and with what the adults are doing so that if anything does happen they're on top of it. And the organizations need to provide training to kids," says Patterson. "Kids need to know that some situations could be risky. If someone tries to isolate them from the supervision of other people or from their friends, that's a risky situation." Organizations like the Boy Scouts of America, he says, have extensive screening programs in place and also warn children about the dangers of child molesters.

Patterson has advised many organizations on how to screen volunteers. He says any group can be the target of opportunistic molesters. "I know of cases in Big Brothers, I know of cases in the YMCA and the Boy Scouts. The Boy Scouts have a million and a half registered Boy Scout leaders, and they have 200 cases a year, and 4 million kids. So the probability or possibility that a person is going to be a child molester is very small. It's horrible when a person misuses their position and abuses a child. ... But it needs to be taken into perspective of the total organization and what happens."

There's no sure way of identifying somebody who has a tendency to molest children, concludes Patterson, but comprehensive screening can reduce the likelihood of molesters infiltrating an organization. "The responsibility for protecting children lies with the organization, with the child's parents and," says Patterson, "to the extent the child can help protect himself." ■

Twin Cities Philanthropy

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and environmental stewardship.

In Dayton Hudson's Target Stores, the discount retailer's employees spent an estimated 150,000 hours on volunteer activities in 1993. Chris Park, senior community relations representative, predicts employee hours will have increased by another third in 1994.

"We stand right up and say, 'It's a good business strategy to give [to charity] because there's value in instilling pride in employees,'" says Parks. "I think, however, we'd be doing this anyway, and we encourage other corporations to get involved."

Some Twin Citians worry that increasing bottom-line pressures, more "internationalization" of Twin Cities-headquartered companies, and the recent retirements of community-minded CEOs will eventually doom Twin Cities corporate volunteerism. But David Nasby, for one, isn't fretting.

"I've heard that wolf cry regularly," Nasby says, "but quite frankly, it isn't happening. I would even argue that corporate philanthropy [in the Twin Cities] is increasing." ■

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McKeown says, offers foundations a higher comfort level and also allows them to respond faster to developing problems.

Results are Key

Virtually all foundations expect agencies to produce evidence of results upon project completion. Again, the Minnesota Council on Nonprofits committee understands this emphasis on productivity, saying in its draft document, "Outcome results rather than strictly output results must be the focus."

"We're asking grant seekers, as well as ourselves, to be very clear on what we expect the outcomes of grants to be," explains Moore. "We've always been aware of these expectations, but perhaps we're even more conscious of reducing any expectation gaps."

Adds Samelson, "I don't think any foundation just willy-nilly throws its money around. If there's anything we're doing differently today than several years ago, it's that we're looking at how to do more leveraging of a project's impact."

More foundations are also looking for evidence a project will sustain itself beyond its completion date. For example, a foundation funding a curriculum change in an education program might look for indications the modifications will last for years hence.

"Like any foundation, we don't plan on underwriting a project forever," Samelson says. "We're all looking for a project that has staff leadership and planning—that offers a good possibility of being self sustaining."

Some foundations want agencies to demonstrate how project results will be shared with others who can benefit. In some cases, foundations believe collaborations among several agencies on certain projects will produce the best yields. At Pew, that foundation is also willing to help agencies broadcast the lessons learned from successful projects.

"Nobody—not the government, nonprofit sector or private industry—has enough money in this country to do everything that needs to be done," Samelson says. "We're entering into an era where we're all going to have to look twice at how effectively we're spending money. I think we will increasingly depend on each other to learn from each other, evaluate each other and give feedback to each other. And I think that's good." ■