



**V**olunteer screening is an important and necessary for any youth serving organization. Programs must consider each potential volunteer and whether they present a risk—physically or emotionally – to a young person. A quality screening process requires program staff to collect and analyze a variety of types of information to determine if the potential volunteer can provide the mentee with a positive experience. This requires the program to consider the applicant’s ability to meet program requirements and connect appropriately with people. Some well meaning applicants will demonstrate an inability to meet requirements. It is an unfortunate reality that some individuals will seek volunteer opportunities that provide access to a vulnerable population. For this reason, it is vital that potential volunteers are screened for previous criminal or questionable behavior. This document is designed to help program staff consider the various tools available to gather objective data during the volunteer selection process. Programs should consider their program model (community-based, site-based, peer, etc.), target population, and other variables when determining which tools will be used in the selection process. Use this resource to guide discussions related to policy and procedures, train new staff, or to provide a refresher for experienced team members.

## Tools to Gather Objective Data

### Interactions

Mentoring professionals should observe applicants during the interview, orientation, training, phone calls and at any other time they have contact with potential volunteers. Things to consider:

- Questions and comments- are they appropriate?
- Comfort and behavior- How does this person interact with others?
- Communication- How well does this person communicate with others?
- Reactions- How do staff members and others personally react to this person?
- Timing- Does this person respond in a timely fashion or are they overly anxious or chronically late in response?

### Orientation

Orientation provides and opportunity to help a potential volunteer understand the design and goals of the program, the expectations for volunteers, and the screening process. Predators will often opt out of programs with a strong and comprehensive screening process. For this reason, it is important to provide a detailed account of the process and the information that is gathered. You want to welcome the potential volunteer while clearly conveying the professional nature of the organization.

- It can be helpful to have two staff members present at orientation sessions. This allows one staff member to observe candidates while the other facilitates the session.
- Write down notes about candidate’s behaviors, questions and concerns shortly after the session.
- Be careful not to scare away candidates- thank them for coming and help them understand the importance of the process for both screening and matching.

### Background Checks

Background checks provide information regarding criminal history, child abuse, driving history and sex offender status. This is incredibly personal information and confidentiality policies should describe who has access to the information and how it is filed. Programs should have policies and procedures that clearly guide staff decisions

- related to background checks. Things to consider:
- What criminal and other background information will result in the rejection of a potential volunteer?
  - What does the programs legal counsel have to say about background checks and eligibility?

*Continued on page 2*

## Continued from page 1

- What is the policy if someone shares information about juvenile or other criminal behavior that is not reflected in the background check?
- Will the agency accept background checks that have been conducted for other organizations?
- Who makes the final decision regarding eligibility when background checks are questionable but do not clearly meet the standard for automatic rejection?

## Written Application

Applications provide basic information about the potential volunteer, permission to begin background and reference checks, and other information that can help guide the screening and interview process. It is important that all questions are completed and answers are not omitted. Note the time between a request for an application and the submission of the application. Late applications may reflect a difficulty in making a commitment, following instructions, or meeting deadlines.

## References

References are used to verify information that has been provided by the applicant and to learn more about their personality, experiences, and appropriateness for the position. Reference can be sent in the mail or electronically or completed by phone. Phone references will provide more information than written references.

References need a context to appropriately answer questions. An overview of the program and the volunteer position are needed, but this should be done quickly. Assure the reference

## Interview

All parts of the screening process are important, however; the interview provides the best opportunity to screen an applicant. Many programs choose to conduct interviews at the mentor's home. This is of particular importance for programs that allow youth to visit the mentor's home. There is inherent risk involved when a staff member enters the home of a potential volunteer. Home interviews should involve two staff members when possible and training regarding home visits is recommended.

Interviews provide a chance to learn about the applicant's:

- Reason/motivation for volunteering
- Past personal and professional experiences
- Support network
- Interests
- History of abuse
- Preferences

Interviews can assist with the screening and matching process and volunteers should be informed that their answers

will be used for these purposes. Detailed notes, word for word when possible, should be taken to document the applicant's response. These responses can then be reviewed at a later time to ensure that all questions were answered completely and that the responses match the other information that has been gathered. When reviewing responses, staff should look to see if there is a pattern of sharing too much, too little or off topic information. Applicants should be invited to share additional information and ask questions following the formal interview questions. The interview process should never be rushed. Both the interviewer and the applicant should hold a significant amount of time for this process.

The interviewer may need to modify the interview to a shortened form if the applicant says or does something that immediately disqualifies him from volunteering for the organization. Interviewers should not accept or reject the applicant at the interview because of safety and legal concerns.

that their answers will be confidential. When reviewing references, consider the following:

- Did the applicant submit the names of references that are appropriate? Can they speak to the questions that are asked?
- Has the reference known the applicant for a significant period of time?
- Is the reference convincing? Do they answer the questions completely and come across as genuine?

- Does the reference share information that matches what you have learned throughout the screening process?
- Is the reference positive?
- Does the reference seem to be restrained when answering questions?
- What is not said? Sometimes a reference is afraid to say something negative, but they are careful with their words and avoid positive statements.

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## Driving Record and Proof of Insurance

The driving record is particularly important for community based mentoring programs that allow volunteers to transport youth. The policy and procedure for the organization should clearly identify what offenses will be rejected. Similarly to criminal backgrounds, a period of time may be noted in the policy to state how many years must separate volunteer activity and certain offenses. Many programs use a number of points on the driving record as a way to screen in this area.

Proof of insurance is often obtained to ensure that the applicant is driving legally, as insurance is a requirement for all drivers in Michigan. Additionally, insurance provides an extra layer of protection if there is an accident. Finally, proof of insurance can be compared to other information provided by the applicant to ensure consistency.

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## Training

Training provides an opportunity to gain a great deal of information about the potential volunteer. As noted in the beginning of this document, all interactions with the applicant provide an opportunity to observe how the applicant reacts to different situations, how he relates to others, the kinds of questions and comments that he makes, and how he communicates verbally and nonverbally.

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## Red Flags

Red flags are warning signs. A red flag could indicate a range of things. Sometimes the applicant is just not a good fit for the program because of other life circumstances which may prevent him/her from being a successful mentor. Other red flags are signs that applicant may have less than positive motives. When you encounter a red flag, it is important to dig a bit deeper to determine if there is cause for concern or not. Many times there is a valid reason for the red flag. When screening volunteers, the warning signs should be taken seriously and considered as part of the final decision to accept or reject the applicant. Below is a list of potential red flags.

- An applicant who lacks family, friends or other genuine relationships. This may be of particular concern if the applicant is friendly or charming.
- An applicant that has a history of volunteer and professional positions and hobbies that provide access to a specific age group of children and allows for unsupervised time.
- Short amount of time living in the community
- Lack of personal references
- References who are not able to comment on character or interests
- References who do not seem to know the applicant well
- Very specific when describing the type of youth s/he wants to be matched with
- Overly anxious to be matched- tries to rush the screening process
- Does not provide much information about his/her childhood and background in the interview
- Staff members do not feel comfortable with the applicant
- "Gut feelings" or informed intuition
- Incomplete applications
- Information from various sources does not match up
- Applicant was rejected by another youth serving organization or talks about not starting but not finishing the process to become a volunteer with another organization
- Strong interest in being matched with a young person who is extremely needy or who has significant problems
- An applicant who has a very busy schedule but drops everything to get through the screening process as quickly as possible
- Overly helpful to staff members
- Seems to be trying to meet his/her own personal needs rather than the needs of a young person (wants to feel needed or important)
- Applicant is stand-offish
- Major life changes that might make the volunteer physically or emotionally unavailable
- Notable change in the frequency of contact between the applicant and the organization
- Criminal record
- History of abuse (Not all victims will abuse, but most abusers have been a victim. How he/she has coped with the abuse can provide helpful information).
- Personal or family history of alcoholism, drug use, depression
- Frequent moves between jobs or residences
- A candidate who does not live near the community being served
- Applicant who was referred by another youth serving agency

- Vague answers when asked what they would like to do with the youth or a focus on activities that occur in isolation
- Strong interest in activities that last for many hours and are isolated: camping, hiking, day trips, visiting a vacation home with no mention of other activities that are shorter in duration or less isolated
- Unhealthy attitudes
- References say that this is what the applicant needs right now or that the applicant is looking for some direction
- Lack of involvement with other adults and significant involvement with children and youth
- Inappropriate behavior and questions
- Focus on rules- "Are overnight trips allowed? Can she/he come to my house?"
- Extreme interest in wanting to know what happens if the youth does not like him/her
- Inappropriate jokes
- Extreme behavior
- Lack of balance in his/her life

## Putting it all Together

Once training is complete and all of the information has been gathered, it is time to make the final decision regarding the potential volunteer. All staff members who have interacted with the applicant or participated in the screening process should make this decision together by reviewing all notes and materials. To guide this process, the team should address the following:

- What is your personal reaction/ intuition regarding this applicant and their appropriateness for the program?
- Has there been consistency in answers throughout the screening process?

## Resource:

Friends for Youth, Inc. (2006). *Screening applicants for effectiveness (SAFE): Guidelines to prevent child molestation in mentoring and youth serving organizations*. Redwood City, CA: Friends for Youth, Inc.

- Is the candidate a good fit for the program?
- Does anyone on the team have concerns?

## Ongoing Screening

Screening should not stop after an applicant is selected as a mentor. Periodic background checks should be conducted annually (at minimum). Additionally, the match monitoring process should be utilized to ensure that the match is participating in appropriate activities. All concerns reported to the program should be taken seriously.



## For more information...

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