6 Steps to Keep Your Ministry Safe

Selecting staff and volunteers you can trust.
from ChurchWorkerScreening.com

You are in charge of selecting staff and volunteers who will not intentionally harm anyone at your church. This is a moral and legal imperative. If you do not do your job with precision and there is criminal activity, it can dramatically impact the life of the child, the church, and its leaders. Consider the following:

- The trauma to victims
- The emotional and spiritual impact on the congregation
- The negative response of the community
- The stress of litigation and the investigative process
- The personal impact on church leaders

Here are six initial steps to help keep your ministry safe:

1. Do you have current position descriptions, in writing, that frame the role of volunteer, staff, or mentor?

For many, volunteering at their church is a rewarding, and often, a new experience. Most do what they think is right in the majority of situations, but there are many gray areas where the volunteer makes the wrong decision putting both themselves and the church at risk. Volunteers need to know what is expected of them so have available a manual outlining the do's and don'ts.

2. Do you have selection-or-rejection procedures?

Don't take the attitude that you know everyone and can judge which kind of background check you should do on an individual basis. Yes, each congregation needs to assess its risk and develop its guidelines for screening, but being selective with whom you screen may open the doors to discrimination lawsuits. There should be, in writing, a process of selection or rejection based on certain pre-set guidelines.

3. Do you have a well-thought-out volunteer or employment application?

Everyone working or volunteering should fill out and sign the application. Have a place for the applicant to put date of birth, social security number and signature. Without this vital information, full criminal searches and social traces cannot be executed. Make sure you get authorization for a full investigative report including criminal records, driving records and information provided by credit bureaus, if necessary. Ask for 10 years or more of previous addresses, and get county names as well for those addresses.

4. Do you have a secure environment in which to store the applications?

Insure all information is used and stored in a safe environment. Allow only certain individuals to view applications. Use a screening company that complies with the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA). Under this act, screening companies are required to implement various safeguards, such as high-security firewall equipment and 24-hour monitoring.

5. Do you have a keen eye when reading the finished applications?

Here are a few things to look for when checking the volunteer applications. Look for omissions. Studies show that most omissions are deliberate. Missing information can give clues about what the applicant does not want you to know. For example, failure to list a former supervisor's name may mean the applicant doesn't want you to talk with the supervisor. Make sure every month is accounted for as far as employment and education history. Gaps often indicate that the applicant was unstable and/or unemployed for long periods of time and may even have been in prison.

6. Are you using a thorough and fast background checking company?

The Volunteers for Children Act signed in 1998 states that you can be sued for negligent hiring if you have an incident with one of your volunteers or employees and you did not conduct a national search to look for a previous criminal record.
There are different kinds of background checks, from simple personal references to full criminal background checks, driving records, and social security verification. If you check if an applicant has criminal activity in only one state, then you are not carrying our your due diligence. Currently, 39 states can be searched for criminal activity and 32 states for their sexual offender registries, instant and online. You have a moral obligation to take preventive steps that may side-step a tragedy, and with our transient society, this is a must.

Why should you conduct a social security number and date-of-birth verification?

Deceptive people know how to beat the system. They know that to run a criminal background check all a background checking company needs is a name and a date of birth—any name and any date of birth. Most likely nothing will be found with that applicant. However, if you do a simultaneous investigation on a subject that includes searching criminal information and social security and date of birth verification, then you have done the most in-depth search possible. Make sure applicants are who they say they are.

Many professionals agree that the church and other non-profits are the predator's last refuge. Perpetrators are looking for easy access to vulnerable youth, children, elderly and handicapped, and often, just seeing a volunteer application often tells perpetrators that they should move on.

ChurchWorkerScreening.com, a website affiliated with ChurchStaffing.com, exists to help churches be as sure as they can that their children's volunteers are above reproach.