

BACKGROUND SCREENING FOR COACHES AND VOLUNTEERS

Modified from the National Alliance for Youth Sports Background Screening Update.

The goal of every Little Dribblers' Basketball local league should be to provide the highest quality of basketball experience for the kids in their community. In order to have a quality program, administrators must have as their primary objective to protect the kids in their program. This is done by through a pro-active Volunteer Screening process that must include Criminal Background Checks.

The Components of a Thorough Volunteer Screening Process to Determine Eligibility:

Select the most qualified individuals (those who understand the organization's goals and who will not create additional risks for the organization). Also and equally important, the organization must exclude individuals that have certain criminal histories or who may increase the level of acceptable risk to the organization overall.

The concept of "due diligence" must be embraced by youth sports organizations. This refers to the complete and careful effort made to investigate a potential volunteer's background. It is the organization's responsibility to identify and exclude volunteers who pose risks to young athletes.

The following components must be included to thoroughly (or comprehensively) screen potential volunteers:

1. **An Application Form must be completed** for all volunteer positions. Required information should include name, address, references and employers. Insist that every potential volunteer complete the form, regardless of how long they have been associated or how desperate the organization is for "warm bodies." Applications should be signed and dated by the potential volunteer. A copy of their photo identification should also be attached to their completed application form.
2. **Review Information and Check References** that was provided in the volunteer's application form. When reviewing, look for any inconsistencies, gaps in time, frequent moves, etc. Don't assume that just because all the information on the form looks legitimate that it is – verify everything. If you don't take the time to check references and confirm employment history, you are creating opportunities for individuals to become a part of your program that can potentially cause enormous harm to children. Remember, you must take every step possible to ensure that every child is fully protected, and that means being diligent and checking each prospective volunteer's information, no matter how time consuming and tedious it may be and document everything you find out in a confidential manner.

3. **Interview the potential volunteer.** Gut level and first impressions are important! Depending on the number of volunteers that are connected to your programs, some organizations will opt for short telephone interviews while others will utilize a more formal approach.

Since the majority of the volunteers will have a child in the program, many organizations conduct the short interview during the registration process. As the parent registers their child and then agrees to potentially volunteer, this can be a time for you (or your staff) to ask some questions and make some notes on their application form.

Develop a standard interview routine to save time and allow for consistency. When you have a carefully constructed list of questions that everyone uses it allows your organization to be more effective when selecting candidates. When compiling your list of questions don't be afraid to ask some tough ones. Also, if you run a large organization and several different staff members will be conducting interviews, by having a pre-determined list of questions it is easier for groups to compare notes on individuals.

4. **Conduct a Criminal History Background Check.** Today a thorough Criminal History Background Check should include the following components: There are many online providers for Criminal Background Checks. If using one of these services, make sure you know exactly how they do the search

- **Social Security Number (SSN) and name verification.** Obtain a copy of the potential volunteer's social security card. In verifying the social security number, you are ensuring accuracy in searching for the proper individual.
- **Sex Offender Registry Search (SOR).** Sex offenders who have completed their criminal sentences are required to "register" to track where they live and their activities. The information included within the SOR is made available to the general public via a variety of websites. Many, if not most sex offenders comply with the reporting requirements and residency restrictions. But many don't so we must understand that while checking the SOR is a significant component, it is only one part of the component of a thorough check.
- **National Criminal Database search.** Many databases exist that contain millions of records and summary information about criminal convictions throughout the United States.
- **A County or Statewide Criminal search when applicable.** In many places, conducting the National Criminal Database search includes state and county information. Organizations must determine what information is available in their jurisdiction to determine if the additional state and/or county checks are necessary. Please note that these searches can be costly and should ONLY be conducted if your area is not included in the National Criminal Database search.

- **Compare Results against Disqualifiers.** Once the above four components have been completed, the organization must decide if the candidate is a suitable volunteer. Every reasonable effort should be made to protect youth sports participants from adults in the program who have a history of unacceptable criminal activity. It is estimated that 9.6% of all volunteers screened have a criminal record and 2.9% of would be coaches have had convictions involving sex offenses, violence or other felonies.

Be aware that a criminal history background check is just one component of a thorough screening process since there are many people who do not have a criminal history but are inappropriate for serving in your organization.

WHAT DISQUALIFIES A POTENTIAL VOLUNTEER?

Before we look at the information obtained from the Criminal History Background check, the following automatic disqualifiers are important to note:

An applicant provides inaccurate information in their application.

References provide unpleasant or disturbing information about the potential volunteer Information gathered in the interview raises questions about the potential volunteer's motives The volunteer refuses to complete the screening process

Then, we must analyze the information gathered from the Criminal History Background Check. If an applicant is found to have been convicted of any of the following offenses, he or she should not be allowed to work with children.

- Sex Offenses and Misconduct
- Violent Felonies
- Felonies (other than sex or violence related) within the past 10 years
- Any child abuse or domestic violence convictions
- Misdemeanors within the past seven years

Organizations must determine for themselves a specific list of offenses that will eliminate a potential volunteer. Additionally, pending convictions and/or arrests for the above items should be considered as organizations determine volunteer eligibility.

Other important considerations during the process:

Abide by your written policies. Be consistent and tell everyone about your screening initiatives to ensure that the very best volunteers are a part of your organization.

Some organizations establish a special committee specifically to manage the background check process. This may include deciding on a

Document “why” for whatever decision the organization makes about a volunteer.

Confidentiality is important! All information obtained in response to the criminal background check or disclosed in the review process should be kept confidential and not disclosed or discussed outside of the review process. Criminal history files should be maintained separate from any file accessible to the public or unauthorized personnel.

An organization should conduct follow-up background checks at least every two years on volunteers that continue to serve.

1. Written Screening Policy

The written policy must be readily available and communicated to ALL. It should be required that ALL volunteers go through the same screening process. A written policy shows the organization’s commitment to ensuring that only the most qualified individuals are involved in the program and may help to proactively defuse potential conflict resulting from misunderstandings or miscommunication. Even if everybody in the organization knows each other, volunteers should be considered as applicants and should be expected to go through the screening process with No Exceptions!

2. Job Descriptions

The job description provides a detailed outline of the responsibilities and duties of each volunteer position. A well-crafted job description reduces risk in organizations by establishing boundaries for what the volunteer should or should not do, focusing and communicating the qualifications for the job, and providing documentation if it is necessary to show that the volunteer was acting outside of their responsibilities.

3. Consent/Release Form

The consent form is necessary to authorize the organization to verify an applicant’s information. The consent form is also needed to investigate the individual’s background. The consent form must be signed and dated. The presence of the consent form makes it clear that the information on the application will be checked and therefore helps to secure the validity of the information.

4. Application Form

Require ALL volunteers to complete an application. Applications should be signed and dated by applicants. They should be filed and should be confidential with only the key administrators in charge of the program having access to the application information. Many organizations also require a copy of some form of identification (driver’s license, passport, etc.) to accompany the application form.

Conclusion

There is no way to be 100 percent certain about any person working in youth sports. The more preventative measures that are taken, however, the more likely children and your organization will be protected.

Remember the following:

Screening is a pro-active approach to ensure that the organization has the right type of volunteers in all positions.

A comprehensive background check must be conducted on every potential volunteer. Organizations must never rely on any one factor when determining the competency and safety of a prospective volunteer. There are several criteria a volunteer must meet to be considered suitable to work with children.

The more steps an organization takes, the thicker its protective shield. In addition to background checks, an organization must provide training, continuous supervision and accountability.