

**Brought to Nonprofit and Government Members  
By the Points of Light Foundation**

***Volunteer Screening: Part of an Integrated  
Risk Management Program***



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS:

<b>1. Risk Management</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Volunteer Screening</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. Position Description Worksheet</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4. Volunteer Application</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>5. Volunteer Agreement</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>6. Recommended Steps in Conducting Interviews</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>7. Background/Reference Checks</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>8. Getting More Information</b>	<b>11</b>

**Welcome to *Working Solutions*, a bimonthly collection of information and tip sheets on a particular issue, designed to provide Points of Light Foundation nonprofit and government member volunteer managers with practical solutions to everyday challenges. The July/August edition focuses on volunteer screening information and tools as part of an integrated risk management program.**

**If you have not received a copy of the April/May *Working Solutions*, please contact [tothepoint@pointsoflight.org](mailto:tothepoint@pointsoflight.org) or 202-729-6019 for an email or hard copy version.**

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## RISK MANAGEMENT

Risk management and liability reduction issues are important considerations when working with volunteers. They are also a necessary step in protecting your organization from unexpected or unfortunate incidents. It is important to establish a risk management plan before volunteer activities begin. A risk management plan is necessary because it helps protect everyone involved in the volunteer program (organization, volunteers, clients, etc.) from personal harm, property loss, and lawsuits. Your organization's leaders, staff, and volunteers should be part of the risk management process and be aware of your policies and procedures.

A key component in risk management is volunteer screening. We have found that when Foundation members begin their risk management planning process, staff at the Points of Light often receive requests for tools or strategic resources related to volunteer screening and background checks. To address these questions we have chosen to dedicate this issue of *Working Solutions* to provide some helpful tools and direct you towards some of the available resources.

“Risk management is not just looking for trouble, it's looking for solutions that make your organization more effective.” – Tremper and Kostin, 1993:4

When developing a risk management plan for your volunteers:

- Review and update your organization's insurance coverage.
- Review your state restrictions and regulations regarding children/youth, if your volunteers will be working with children or if you have youth volunteers.
- Establish and follow consistent screening procedures for all volunteers.

When volunteers are to be placed in direct contact with at-risk clients, thorough screening procedures, beyond just personal reference checks, should be instituted (i.e. criminal record checks).

- Ask volunteers to sign volunteer agreements and/or liability waivers.
- Establish effective supervision procedures for all volunteers.
- Orient and train all volunteers before they begin their work.

## VOLUNTEER SCREENING

Incorporating screening techniques throughout the volunteer placement process—from creating position descriptions to conducting effective interviews to requesting background checks—can streamline the placement of volunteers and maximize the potential for placing the best volunteer candidate in the right volunteer position. Protecting your organization’s reputation and its staff involves establishing a basic screening process that reduces risk.

### Volunteer Screening Check List

- ❑ Does your organization assess all volunteer positions for the degree of possible risk and liability?
- ❑ Do all volunteers have position descriptions that describe the essential duties of their positions?
- ❑ Are all applicants for volunteer positions subject to a basic screening process consisting of:
  - Applications and agreements,
  - Face-to-face interviews, and
  - Background checks?
- ❑ Do you, the volunteer coordinator, follow up on references? (Applicants do not always expect that their references will be checked. Do not assume that applicants only supply the names of people who will speak well of them.)
- ❑ Are police record/criminal checks requested when appropriate?
- ❑ Is verification of licensure or educational credentials requested, when required for the volunteer position?

## VOLUNTEER POSITION DESCRIPTION

Position descriptions are key elements of successful screening processes. They are an integral part of risk management and without them it would be difficult to screen, place, and evaluate volunteers in a fair and reasonable way. Consider using this worksheet to develop position descriptions in your organization.

Well-written volunteer position descriptions, can help volunteers screen themselves by helping them identify if they have the necessary time, skills and interest to accomplish the tasks outlined. Volunteer position descriptions also help identify questions for the volunteer interview.

### Sample Volunteer Position Description Worksheet:

#### Sections of the Job Description

#### Explanations

<b>Job Title:</b>	What the job will be called, or what position is being offered.
<b>Purpose:</b>	This section describes the specific purpose of the position – the expected result the job is to accomplish. If possible, the purpose should be stated in relation to the program’s mission and goals.
<b>Key Responsibilities:</b>	List the position’s major duties. Include examples of what might be done to accomplish the purpose.
<b>Location:</b>	Work site where the volunteer will report.
<b>Supervision:</b>	Indicate the title of the person to whom the volunteer reports, as well as procedures for mentoring and dealing with problems.
<b>Length of Appointment:</b>	Note the time period in which the volunteer will serve, and include time restrictions, if applicable.
<b>Time Commitment:</b>	Indicate the approximate number of days or hours required per week and flexibility in scheduling.
<b>Qualifications:</b>	List education, work experience, knowledge, and skills required. If a criminal history record check or other background check will be conducted, it should be indicated here.
<b>Benefits</b>	Training, insurance, parking, events to thank volunteers, etc.
<b>Support Provided:</b>	List resources that will be available to the volunteer.

This document is adapted from the Nonprofit Risk Management Center’s *Accident Preparation and Response Tutorial* ([www.nonprofitrisk.org](http://www.nonprofitrisk.org)) and Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch’s *Volunteer Management: Mobilizing all the Resources of the Community*. 1998.

## VOLUNTEER APPLICATION

When interviewing volunteer applicants, use a volunteer application form as a method for gathering information that will be used in the later steps of the screening process (e.g. past employment, education verification, references, interviews).

### Sample Volunteer Application

Name_____						
Address_____		City_____		State_____		Zip_____
Phone (Day)_____			(Evening)_____			
Email:_____						
Emergency Contact: _____			Phone_____			
Past Volunteer Experience (include organization/agency, position, supervisor phone/email):  						
Employment (most recent and include company, position, supervisor phone/email):  						
Time available for volunteering (circle all that apply):						
Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
Morning (9am – 12pm)		Afternoon (12pm – 4pm)			Evening (4pm – 8pm)	
Frequency of volunteer availability: (e.g. weekly, semi-weekly, monthly, etc.)_____						
How would you like to help this organization?_____						
Hobbies, interests, skills: [organizations may wish to include specific examples of the types of skills they are looking for here.]_____						
Education/Credentials (if over 18, start with high school):						
School:	Date:	Degree:	Location:			
_____						
_____						
References: List three non-family members who can provide references on your ability to perform this volunteer position:						
Name:		Address:		Phone/Email:		
_____						
Why do you want to volunteer with this organization?_____						

## VOLUNTEER AGREEMENT

The volunteer agreement is intended to assure an understanding between volunteer managers and volunteers of the volunteer position description and the organization's policies/procedures.

### Sample Volunteer Agreement

#### Agency

We, \_\_\_\_\_ [agency], agree to accept the services of  
\_\_\_\_\_ [volunteer] beginning \_\_\_\_\_ and we commit to the

following:

1. To provide accurate information, training and assistance.
2. To ensure supervision and provide job assessment feedback.
3. To respect the skills and individual needs of the volunteer.

#### Volunteer

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to serve as a volunteer and commit to the following:

1. To perform volunteer duties to the best of my ability.
2. To adhere agency rules, policies and procedure, including record-keeping requirements and confidentiality of agency and client information.
3. To meet time and duty commitments, or to provide adequate notice so the alternate arrangements can be made.

#### Agreed to:

---

Volunteer

Staff Representative

---

Date

Date

## RECOMMENDED STEPS IN CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

**Note:** These steps should be streamlined in the case of one-time or short-term volunteering. Interviews for short-term or episodic volunteers can be shortened to a couple of minutes. Also, for some group projects, such as corporate or church groups, the interview may be conducted with one representative, instead of each individual/volunteer.

1. Thank the applicant for interest in the organization.
2. Let the applicant know about the purpose of the interview: to explore if and how he/she and the organization can best work together in a way that benefits both parties.
3. Let the applicant know the topics to be covered in the interview: brief background of the organization, his/her background, next steps, etc.
4. Provide short background orientation on organization and ask if the potential volunteer has questions.
5. Provide an explanation of the organization's expectations of volunteers (some of this may need to occur after you've identified the specific position for the prospect).
6. Ask about the prospect's general background (clarify information from the application).
7. Ask about his/her interests and aspirations in volunteering.
8. Ask about *necessary* skills needed for the position.
9. Request *necessary* background information/credentials.

### SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

- What additional information would you like to know about our organization?
- What attracted you to our organization?
- What type of volunteer work have you done before? What did you like best about that work?
- What kinds of experience or training have you had that you can contribute here?
- How do you deal with situations that don't go as planned?
- Would you rather work on your own, with a group, or with a partner? Why?

**TIPS:** There are two basic approaches to volunteer interviews:

1. To determine the skills and interests of the perspective volunteer so the volunteer manager can assign the individual to an appropriate role.
2. The prospect has applied for a specific position and the interview is used to determine whether the individual meets the requirements.

### INTERVIEW QUESTION TO NOT ASK:

(*unless needed to determine whether fit for particular positions*)

- Age.
- Birthplace.
- Height and weight.
- Marital status.
- National origin.
- Religious affiliation.
- Arrest record.
- Race.
- Sexual orientation.
- Anything not directly related to prospect's ability to perform the specific volunteer position(s) they are considering.

10. Ask the applicant any questions to which you need answers to place him/her in the right position.

11. Ask the applicant if he/she has any questions/concerns.

12. Agree on next steps.

## BACKGROUND/REFERENCE CHECKS

Background and personal reference checks are especially important in the nonprofit and government sectors especially when vulnerable care recipients receive volunteer services. Here are some questions each organization should ask when establishing policies and procedures for background checks:

- What sort of background checks will be conducted for each position and by whom?
- Will you check fingerprints, driving records, and criminal records?

### Types of Background Checks and Sources of Information:

Type	Example Positions	Sources
<b>Criminal Records</b> – process of determining if individual has any recorded information in their name and date of birth pertaining to criminal convictions.	Any position where volunteer will be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carrying a weapon</li> <li>• Driving a vehicle</li> <li>• Have access to drugs</li> <li>• Have access to master keys or other security mechanisms</li> <li>• Working with children or vulnerable clients</li> </ul>	County, State and Federal Courts  <a href="http://www.volunteersselect.com">http://www.volunteersselect.com</a> <a href="http://www.ussearch.com">http://www.ussearch.com</a> <a href="http://www.rapsheets.com">http://www.rapsheets.com</a>
<b>Department of Corrections Records</b> -- State-by-State	(See Criminal Records)	Most states have a web site where a free search can be conducted.
<b>National Wanted Fugitive Search</b>	(See Criminal Records)	Most states have a website with the top wanted fugitives listed.
<b>Motor Vehicle Records</b> - source providing information on potential volunteer's. Arrest warrants issued for failure to pay minor traffic fines, alcohol or illegal drug convictions, and multiple accidents, etc. are some of the data available.	Volunteer Driver (i.e. Senior Citizen Program, Foodbank)	State Department of Motor Vehicles  <a href="http://www.volunteersselect.com">http://www.volunteersselect.com</a> <a href="http://www.ussearch.com">http://www.ussearch.com</a> <a href="http://www.rapsheets.com">http://www.rapsheets.com</a>
<b>Employment Verification</b> – verification with companies listed under employment history on volunteer application. Some areas to address are job title, length of employment, salary, reason for termination and re-hire status.	All volunteers should be subject to this type of background check if they have an employment history or are currently employed and list this information on volunteer application. It is a reference source.	Contact companies/ organizations listed on volunteer application.
<b>Credit Reports</b> - provides complete credit/financial profile of applicant. Allowed under the Fair Credit Reporting Act for any permissible purpose, including volunteer screening.	Any position where volunteer will have access to money (i.e. petty cash) or valuables.	<a href="http://www.volunteersselect.com">http://www.volunteersselect.com</a> <a href="http://www.ussearch.com">http://www.ussearch.com</a>
<b>Educational References &amp; Diploma Verification</b>	Professional volunteers (i.e. Doctors, Nurses, Social Workers, Accountants)	Contact college/universities listed.
<b>Professional License Certification</b>	Mental Health Volunteer, Physicians, Nurses, Lifeguards, Massage Therapists, Cosmetologists	Contact professional organizations listed.

These forms are used to get consent from potential volunteers for background checks. You will also want to use this as an opportunity to review the standards and qualifications required for the applied position with a volunteer applicant.

**Sample:**

**Background Check Permission Form**

I hereby allow [name of agency] to perform a check of my background, including:

- Criminal records
- Driving records
- Employment verification/volunteer history
- Credit reports
- Educational/diploma verification
- Personal references

and other persons or sources as appropriate for the volunteer jobs in which I have expressed an interest.

I understand that I do not have to agree to this background check, but refusal to do so may exclude me from consideration for some types of volunteer positions and that all such information collected during the check will be kept confidential.

I hereby also extend my permission to those individuals or organizations contacted for the purpose of this background check to give their full and honest evaluation of my suitability of the described volunteer work and such other information, as they deem appropriate.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

This document is adapted from Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch's *Volunteer Management: Mobilizing all the Resources of the Community*. 1998

**Sample Reference Questions:**

- In what capacity have you known the applicant and for how long?
- What strengths would this person bring to the volunteer position?
- How does the candidate handle frustration and criticism while on the job?
- Do you know any reason why this person should not be considered for a volunteer position?

## WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION

Looking for more information on volunteer screening and risk management or want to access resources we used? Check out these references:

1. Volunteer Marketplace Catalog of the Points of Light Foundation <http://online.pointsoflight.org/source/library/ordershome.cfm> at 1-800-272-8306 or marketplace@PointsofLight.org for publications on many topics including marketing and media.
2. Graff, Linda L. *Beyond Police Checks: The Definitive Volunteer & Employee Screening Guidebook*. Ontario, Canada: Graff and Associates, 1999.
3. Lee, Jarene Frances. *What We Have Learned (the hard way) About Supervising Volunteers: An Action Guide for Making your Job Easier*. Philadelphia, PA: Energize, Inc., 1999.
4. McCurley, Steve and Rick Lynch. *Volunteer Management: Mobilizing All the Resources of the Community*. Downers Grove, IL: Heritage Arts Publishing, 1996.
5. Macduff, Nancy. *Volunteer Screening: An Audio Workbook*. Walla Walla, WA: MBA Publishing, 1996.
6. Tremper, Charles and Gwynne Kostin. *No Surprises: Controlling Risks In Volunteer Programs*. Washington, DC: Nonprofit Risk Management Center. 1993
7. "A Closer Look at the Use of Waivers, Consent Forms and Other Liability Shields in the Nonprofit Sector," *Currents*. Nonprofit Risk Management Center: Summer 1996
8. "Liability: A Barrier to Youth Service Programs," *Currents*. Nonprofit Risk Management Center: Summer 1994
9. Nonprofit Risk Management Center <http://www.nonprofitrisk.org>
10. Energize, Inc. <http://www.energizeinc.com>
11. Volunteer Canada <http://www.volunteer.ca/volunteer/screening.htm>
12. US Search <http://www.ussearch.com>
13. rapsheets.com <http://www.rapsheets.com>
14. Volunteer Select <http://www.volunteerselect.com>