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Volunteer Screening - Balancing Rights, Resources, & Risk

Excerpts from **Beyond Police Checks** by Linda Graff

According to Lorraine Street (The Screening Handbook: Protecting Clients, Staff and the Community), screening is used by organizations to carefully scrutinize individuals...in order to choose the best candidate and to weed out, as far as possible, those who would be incompetent or who would do harm. To achieve this, non-profits need to accomplish a **fine balancing act**, taking into consideration the applicant's rights, available resources and the risk to the client and the organization.

Rights

When designing your screening process ensure that it complies with two key legislations: **PIPEDA and Human Rights**. PIPEDA guides what information is gathered, how it is stored, and who accesses it. Obtaining express permission to gather and distribute personal information is a key principle. Adequate storage of personal information is also essential for both present and past volunteers.

Human Rights legislation also guides what information can be gathered. In order to collect certain information, there must be a direct link between this information and a bona fide occupational requirement. You can only gather information that is directly related to the work that needs to be done.

Resources

As screening becomes more complex, the costs escalate, both in terms of actual dollars but staff time as well. Your organization should take the time to determine your **own philosophy** about who should pay for the costs of screening. Some questions to ask are: Is it appropriate for volunteers to pay for the opportunity to apply to be a volunteer? Will sharing costs prevent some volunteers from volunteering? Is it economically viable for the organization to cover these costs?

Linda Graff describes the concept of the **Sliding Scale of Screening**. Basically, the more risk involved in the position, the more thorough the screening process. An evaluation of the volunteer position and the risks is needed before deciding on the screening process necessary for this job. Modifying the job may be more economical.

Risk

Organizations must protect against **negligent hiring**: being held responsible for crimes or accidents committed by employees (paid and unpaid) while performing their job. This risk increases when the employee has contact with others in isolated or unsupervised settings, when driving, has access to private homes, or has access to children, seniors or other vulnerable persons. The best defence against an allegation of negligent hiring is comprehensive screening.

A measure used to determine if the screening is thorough enough is the principle of **Duty of Care**. Duty of Care requires the organization to do everything that a reasonably prudent person would do in a similar situation to prevent a crime or accident. Don't forget that screening should also be done for Board and Committee members, since they have the greatest authority, are delegated the most power, and make the farthest-reaching decisions.