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A Brief on the Importance of Background Screening for Nonprofits

Are We Putting our Children at Risk?

The exploding growth of nonprofit organizations brings with it an alarming opportunity for volunteers with criminal records to have direct contact with the children that organization was chartered to protect.

Every day, tens of millions of U.S. children access the resources and support network of nonprofit organizations. Volunteers and staff members are the heartbeat of nonprofits and enable them to provide a valuable service to these children. However, in this era of giving, nonprofit organizations are finding themselves in an unusual position: falling prey to individuals applying for jobs or volunteer positions who have criminal records.

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, the number of nonprofit organizations in the United States has grown to 1.4 million. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 64.5 million people did volunteer work at least once from September 2003 to September 2004. The Bureau also reports that annual volunteer hours were the second highest at youth-oriented organizations, second only to religious groups.

As volunteerism increases, so does the risk to children.

ChoicePoint recently conducted an audit of 1.6 million background screens performed during a three year period between 2002 and 2005. The results revealed that more than 86,000 individuals with undisclosed criminal records tried to work or volunteer in the nonprofit sector. The audit indicates:

- Every six minutes a convicted criminal tries to attain a position at a nonprofit organization
- Every 43 hours at least one convicted sex offender tries to attain a position at a youth-oriented nonprofit organization
- In a review of applicants for a large national youth-serving organization, out of approximately 1.03 million applicants screened:
 - 121,392 had criminal records (12 percent or roughly the population of Hartford, Conn.)
 - 740 of those records were sex-related convictions
 - 305 were Registered Sex Offenders
 - 2,031 were drug-related convictions
 - 153 were murder convictions

This same audit shows the hit rate for our nonprofit customers is 5 percent. This statistic means that out of 100 people screened, five of them had a criminal record, an increase of 2 percent since the 2003 audit

How can a nonprofit protect the people it serves?

Today, according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice, 2.7 percent of the U.S. population has served time in jail or prison in their lifetime. If recent incarceration rates remain unchanged, an estimated one out of 15 (6.6 percent) people will serve time in a prison during their lifetime.

A nonprofit can protect the people it serves by conducting a national background check of available records on every volunteer and job applicant prior to hire. For example, a search of the National Criminal File accesses more than 20 million criminal conviction records from a wide range of record sources across all 50 states plus Puerto Rico and Guam.

National background checks are also important because many applicants hold conviction records in a separate state than where they are now applying.

ChoicePoint recently reviewed its screening results for a major youth sports organization. Out of 57,053 searches performed in six months, 6,881 “hits” yielded criminal backgrounds. Nearly fifty percent were outside the state of residence, and 25 people screened were registered sex offenders. Other undisclosed offenses included first degree rape, child abuse-neglect and first degree murder.

The following news stories further stress the importance of background screenings:

- A large nonprofit sports organization started conducting criminal background checks on its 65,000 coaches and volunteers after discovering some of them have committed crimes, including murder and incest (The Seattle Times, March 7, 2004).
- Despite convictions of abuse, a notorious pedophile was able to find work in school systems in two states and volunteer positions with youth organizations and athletic leagues for more than 20 years (Chicago Sun-Times, June 23, 2002).

Of course, hiring a convicted criminal does not mean that the person will commit the same crime again. We believe in the goodness of people and those that can be rehabilitated. However, nonprofit organizations need to consider the recidivism statistics for certain crimes, particularly sex offenders. Sex offenders are four times more likely than non-sex offenders to be arrested for another related crime after their discharge from prison. Nonprofit organizations need to protect the people they serve, and a simple, but thorough background screening (and the appropriate action) can alleviate issues before they arise.

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Appendix: The Top Ten Criminal Offenses Found

Out of the 1.6 million background screens conducted between 2002 and 2005, ChoicePoint found more than 86,000 undisclosed criminal records. The following top ten criminal offenses were identified:

Top Ten Criminal Offenses
1. DWI/DUI
2. Theft/Larceny
3. Simple Worthless Check/Bad Checks
4. Drug Possession **
5. Assault
6. Burglary
7. Sex Related Crimes (including rape)
8. Disorderly Conduct
9. Criminal Trespass
10. Forgery

Note: Additionally, the audit results indicated that 506 Registered Sex Offenders who failed to disclose previous convictions applied to work or volunteer in nonprofit organizations from 2002 - 2005.

** The list excludes basic traffic and driver's license violations, local charges and probation violations.*

*** Drug Possession combines crimes associated with possession of marijuana, possession of cocaine, possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug paraphernalia.*