shepherd's watch

your safe and secure ministry

Safety First

Why You Absolutely Can't Skip
Background Checks

Safety first...

Here's why you absolutely can't skip background checks. Use this guide to conducting background checks on your team.

Jack Anderson* thought it could never happen—at least not at his church. The color drained from his face when he received the call that a police investigation was in progress due to a report of sexual misconduct from one of his volunteers.

The days of thinking nothing like this could ever happen at your church—or to the people your volunteers serve—have long since ended. As a result, the subject of background checks has become a hot issue for churches today. To check—or not to check—is one of many questions children's ministers are asking. Are background checks really worth the expense? How can I get my volunteers to see the need—without offending their good intentions? And how in the world do I get started?

Worth The Expense

Churches weren't asking these questions just a few years ago, but the attention to clergy pedophilia has forced the church to not only ask the questions but to also come up with answers. Paul warned the Ephesians to "have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them" **(Ephesians 5:11)**. **Background checks** have become a new screening tool for the church to expose the darkness.

A survey conducted by *Church Law and Tax Report* found that church volunteers commit 50 percent of all incidents of sexual abuse in churches, paid staff commit 30 percent, and other children commit 20 percent. Many risk-consultant professionals agree that the church and other nonprofits are the predator's last refuge. Perpetrators are looking for easy access to vulnerable children, youth, senior citizens, and people with disabilities, and often just knowing that a screening process is in place protects these vulnerable people.

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 didn't conduct a national search to look for a previous criminal record. So anyone who works with children at your church, paid or unpaid, should be on your list for mandatory **background checks.**

See the Need

Performing background checks requires wisdom and patience in implementing. It's a change your entire church will have to get used to. Here's what others have learned from their efforts to create a **safety-first culture.**

1. Start with prayer.

Cherry Hills Community Church in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, serves about 1,500 children each week in their children's program Grace Place. With a volunteer staff of 500, they felt the need to move forward in making their ministry safe for the children of their church and community. They started the process first with prayer.
"The entire leadership of the church spent time in prayer to discern God's direction to move forward with our new child—protection policy," explains Lori Rase, the assistant administrator to the children's pastor.

2. Create a written policy.

People need time to accept new ideas and methods of operation. Implementing a risk-management process, which includes background checks, must start with a written and approved policy.

Your written policy should explain the rationale for requiring **background checks** and which volunteer positions will be checked. Have the policy accepted and approved by your church's governing board, and then incorporate it into your staff handbook (for paid and unpaid workers).

3. Create a safety-first culture.

Creating a new policy doesn't automatically mean people will buy into the change. You'll need to create a culture that recognizes the need for proper risk-management screening. Rase says their entire staff started the "buzz" within the church to promote their plans for a safer place. "It's the glass-half-empty or half-full syndrome," explains Rase. "It's not a witch hunt, so we wanted to communicate that this really was for the benefit of the ministry and the volunteers."

4. Train your volunteers.

Cherry Hills Community Church creates a safety-first culture through training. They sent letters to all their children's ministry volunteers, inviting them to a special training class about the rationale and importance of implementing background checks.

"We were able to debunk some of the myths the people had—like those who thought we were going to be checking their credit history," Rase explains.

Training is also the key to volunteers accepting the change to background checks at Life Covenant Church in Edmond, Oklahoma. This church calls volunteers in their LifeKIDS ministry Cast Members and requires them to attend training before they serve.

"You don't get to work in a room with children unless you are trained," says Desiree Good, the director of LifeKIDS Central. The training includes risk-management procedures and begins the process of screening volunteers. "Screening helps them see we are serious about this ministry."

Both of these churches have created a culture that communicates that kids are important —and the church cares about their protection.

Getting Started

To implement proper risk management, **background checks** should be included within a total package of screening tools. According to the **Nonprofit Risk Management Center**, a basic screening process for every volunteer should include an application, interview, and reference check. For those volunteer positions that work with vulnerable people (children, youth, or the elderly), additional screening, such as a background check, is a necessary step in the screening process.

1. Perform a national check.

Currently, at least 41 states can be searched for criminal activity, and 38 states for their sexual offenders registries, through electronic reporting online. If you just check an applicant for criminal activity in your home state, you may not be viewed by the courts as having performed your "due diligence." A Social Security verification should also be included in your **background search** to make sure applicants are who they say they are. You have an obligation to take preventative steps that may sidestep a tragedy, and with our transient society, a national search is a must.

2. Determine whom to check.

Realize that not every volunteer in your children's ministry requires the same scrutiny. Mrs. Jones, who updates the attendance records from her home, or the 80-year-old shut-in who helps with those craft cutouts, probably don't need their criminal backgrounds checked. But if the volunteer position involves making contact with children, youth, or others who are vulnerable, use the strictest screening procedures you can realistically implement.

The higher-risk positions often include those who work with children, youth, senior citizens, or the developmentally disabled; counselors; drivers; and individuals with financial responsibilities. The risk increases when they serve frequently or without close supervision. It's a good idea to review questions you may have about screening with your church's insurance agent.

3. Identify mandatory screening positions.

Determine if you operate any programs that require mandatory screening. You may need to check with a local attorney, as these laws vary from state to state and can change at any time. Many states require some form of a criminal background check if you operate a school, preschool, daycare program, health care program, professional counseling center, or program that requires a license or uses licensed professionals. Your insurance provider may also require background checks for you to carry standard liability coverage.

4. Add the screening requirement to ministry descriptions.

Once you've established which positions require a background check, add it to the ministry description. A written ministry description in itself is a risk-management tool because it can state the qualifications needed to get the job done. Clearly state that a criminal **background check** is required to serve in the position. Not only does this help manage the risk—it contributes to changing your culture by stating your expectations up front.

5. Start at the top.

When implementing a new policy at church, many leaders use the approach of "Do what I say, not what I do." This will never fly when it comes to checking someone's personal background or driving record! Instead, lead by example. Your senior pastor should be the first in line for a background check, the other paid staff members should follow, and then the volunteers in leadership positions.

6. Consider your budget.

If you're doing a large number of background checks to get everyone on board, you may need to phase in the process to manage your budget. **Group's Shepherd's Watch** offers background checks starting at only $12.

7. Keep records.

As you begin this process you'll also need to establish a record-keeping system of who's been checked—and who hasn't. A good rule is to check your volunteers every 2 years. Many volunteer management software programs now have a place to input this information, which would include "Date of Check" and "Result." A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet or a good paper filing system can also serve this purpose.

Document every screening effort. Typically, one question raised in court is whether your church has met "due diligence" in the screening process. A file on every volunteer will show this to be the case. According to the Fair Credit Reporting Act, a signed consent form is required to run a background check. Keep the consent form, background check report, and other documents in your files—and keep files secure.

Put safety first in your children's ministry, as Paul warned the Ephesians, and reap the benefit of a secure and caring community.

Check It Out

Confused about selecting a background-check company? Look for these important items as you compare companies.

Coverage

Reporting practices vary for each state and county, with no guarantee that each law enforcement agency reported all felony and misdemeanor convictions. Therefore, look for a firm that offers a national report, including as many registries as possible, rather than just searching within your state or county.

Reliability

Many background-checking companies offer online Internet-based services. Sounds fast and convenient, until you find that their server is down. Timeliness and accuracy are issues you'll want to investigate. Do they offer multiple security features such as password protection, encryption, and SSL (Secure Sockets Layer)? Do they provide backup generator power, duplicate servers, tape and hot-data backups, and multiple operation centers to prevent disruption? Ask about their accuracy rate in the reporting and the correction rate on re-investigations. You want reliable service you can trust.

Service and Support

A background-check company needs to do more than just provide a report. They need to provide support services to assist you in the process. Will you have access to a "live person" to talk with in case you have questions? Do they have a legal department to provide counsel and guidelines to meet Fair Credit Reporting Act requirements? Many companies also provide online archives of all your reports. This way you can go back and retrieve information to keep a record of your files. Buying the cheapest product won't do you any good if you don't have support services to help you.

Convenience

Many background-checking programs offer online screening, which saves time and paperwork. The report is run by the person's Social Security number, rather than fingerprinting, which is another convenience factor. The report needs to include a Social Security number verification to validate the person's identity. Don't let so-called instant reports fool you—they often pull from an outdated report. Reporting frequency varies depending on the state and county. The database needs to update continuously to give current information. It's reasonable to expect a 24- to 48-hour turnaround on delivery of an electronic report.

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