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Ohio 4-H Youth Development Extension Agents' Use of Volunteer Screening Tools

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Ohio 4-H Youth Development Extension Agents' Use of Volunteer Screening Tools

Abstract

While volunteers are needed for youth development programs, it is imperative that a sound selection process is in place so that the most appropriate individuals are selected to work with young people. The article outlines the results of a research project undertaken to describe the current use of volunteer selection tools with the Ohio 4-H Youth Development program. The authors describe the level of use of specific selection tools and the extent to which specific volunteers are screened prior to placement. The authors offer recommendations and implications applicable to any Extension program using volunteers to deliver programs to vulnerable audiences.

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Introduction

Selecting volunteers who have the requisite skills and abilities is often challenging, frustrating, and perceived as a time-consuming process. However, volunteer administrators should recognize that selection of volunteer staff can and should involve the same careful procedures used for hiring paid personnel (Fisher & Cole, 1993). Volunteers are the backbone of nonprofit organizations across the country and, specifically, to the outreach efforts of land-grant universities.

In response to an increasingly litigious society and clientele expectations regarding youth safety, community organizations serving vulnerable populations are expected to exercise a higher degree of care when conducting programs and activities. Reasonable care extends to taking the appropriate steps to ensure that paid and volunteer staff do not do harm to service recipients, the community, organization, or themselves and that the appropriate steps are taken to determine their suitability and safety (Patterson, 1998; McCurley, 1994). A sound strategy to meet this growing expectation is to implement a comprehensive volunteer selection process.

The process of selecting volunteers is one that presents both challenges and opportunities for the organization. Volunteers frequently have high public visibility on behalf of a nonprofit; they are the persons whom individuals dealing with the community organization see first and most often (DeWitt, 1995). When making the decision regarding a potential volunteer's placement, professional staff have a variety of screening tools at their disposal, including:

- Position descriptions,
- Applications,
- Interviews,
- Reference checks,
- Motor vehicle record checks,
- Criminal history record checks,
- Psychological tests,
- Medical tests,
- Home visits, and
- Orientation sessions (Graff, 1999; Patterson, 1998).

When considering a volunteer applicant's potential involvement with the organization, professionals must consider four kinds of risks that a volunteer may pose to clientele:

- Physical harm,
- Emotional harm,
- Theft of or damage to property, and
- Violations of privacy (Patterson, 1998).

Volunteers are increasingly being seen as an important part of an organization's outreach and are beginning to be recognized in legal, governmental, and organizational policies. The increased recognition of volunteer services through organizational policy allows administrators to establish effective volunteer screening practices. Organizations can't afford to place volunteers in positions that result in poor relationships, conflict between paid and volunteer staff (Fisher & Cole, 1993), or harm done to service recipients due to a lack of knowledge or skills.

The 4-H Youth Development program provides educational programs for youth, commonly considered in risk management literature as a vulnerable audience (Patterson, 1998). Ohio 4-H Youth Development programs serve vulnerable populations through involvement in community clubs, residential camping, day camps, special interest activities, after-school programs, school enrichment activities, and other individual and group activities and events. In 1993, a screening process was implemented in Ohio's 88 counties to provide a framework for selecting individuals to serve as volunteers in the 4-H program. Since 1993, no changes have been made to the statewide volunteer involvement policy, although staff have sporadically implemented additional screening strategies on the local level.

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of the descriptive study reported here was to identify the current volunteer screening practices implemented by Ohio 4-H Youth Development Extension Agents. To accomplish the overall purpose of this study, the specific objectives were to:

- a. Establish baseline data identifying current usage of identified volunteer screening procedures;
- b. Identify barriers to conducting face-to-face interviews; and
- c. Identify reasons for non-acceptance of potential 4-H youth development volunteers.

The population for this study was the 110 Ohio 4-H Youth Development Extension Agents providing leadership to county-based programs. The researchers developed a mailed questionnaire to investigate the current level of use of identified screening practices for specific volunteer positions. A panel of experts, consisting of individuals in the volunteer administration profession and Cooperative Extension Service, reviewed the instrument for content and face validity. The researchers made changes to the instrument reflecting the suggestions offered by the panel of experts.

Data were collected according to the mailed survey procedure outline by Dillman (1978). The initial survey questionnaire was mailed to all Ohio State University Extension 4-H Youth Development agents with a cover letter signed by the researchers. A self-addressed stamped return envelope was included in each mailing for respondents to return completed instruments.

After two mailings and a follow-up electronic mail reminder, a response rate of 92% (n=99) was obtained. No further follow-up was done with the remaining non-respondents.

Findings and Conclusions

The data revealed that the application, the standards of behavior form, orientation to youth protection policy, and orientation to 4-H youth development program have the highest level of use by agents. Ohio State University Extension 4-H Volunteer Involvement Policy requires that all potential volunteers complete an application and agree to and sign the standards of behavior and youth protection policy. Extension agents are recognizing the necessity of providing orientation to the organization, therefore helping to ensure a positive experience for the volunteer and the youth they are working with.

Not as widely used screening tools included position descriptions, collecting references, and face-

to-face interviews. While none of these screening tools are required by the organization, each has been strongly recommended for use through ongoing group and individual staff development.

The screening tools with the highest and intermediate levels of use are the most familiar to Ohio 4-H Youth Development staff. Since 1993, with the introduction of the ISOTURE (Boyce, 1971) volunteer management model to Ohio, accompanied by the development of the BLAST (Safrit & Smith, 1993) curriculum and resources, professionals have had support materials to enhance local volunteer management systems.

Minimal to no-use screening tools included criminal history record checks and motor vehicle record checks. These screening tools are not required, nor have they been recommended because they have not been fully explored for their use with Ohio 4-H Youth Development. Furthermore, there have been no concentrated efforts to educate our staff on the benefits and implementation of criminal background or motor vehicle record checks that often reveal the most sensitive information about a potential volunteer.

Table 1.
Level of Screening Tool Usage

Highest Level of Use	Intermediate Level of Use	Minimal Level of Use
Application	Position Description	Criminal History Check
Standards of Behavior	Collecting References	Motor Vehicle Record Check
Orientation to Youth Protection Policy		
Orientation to 4-H Youth Development Program		

Generally, the most extensively screened volunteer positions have the highest level of direct contact with youth and Extension agents. These include the organizational volunteer, project/activity volunteer, and camp counselor. Historically, the selection process for camp counselors has been considered a developmental opportunity for older 4-H youth. This developmental opportunity has become a useful and effective screening process for selecting teens for camp counselor positions.

Intermediately screened positions are key leader/middle manager, county committee volunteer, project committee volunteer, and special interest volunteer. Current volunteers who have experience in community clubs and the overall 4-H program typically fill these volunteer positions. Some volunteer positions, specifically the project or county committee volunteers, are filled through an election process. In these cases, volunteers may not have to complete the standard intake process for that particular county.

The least screened volunteer positions are school enrichment and CarTeens volunteers. A large percentage of school enrichment volunteers are employees of the school system and therefore have completed a screening process to be hired. CarTeens volunteers are not screened extensively because they are youth, are current 4-H members, and have responsibilities for a limited time period.

Table 2.
Degree of Screening by Volunteer Position

Highest Screened Volunteer Positions	Intermediate Screened Volunteer Positions	Least Screened Volunteer Positions
Organizational Volunteer	Key Leader/Middle Manager	School Enrichment Volunteer
Project/Activity Volunteer	Special Interest Volunteer	CarTeens
Teen Camp Counselor		

County Committee Volunteer		
Project Committee Volunteer		

The research team had a strong interest in further understanding the extent to which face-to-face interviews were being conducted by paid staff. At the time of this research project development, there was increasing interest in requiring all potential volunteers to be interviewed as part of the screening process. The data show that a higher percentage of Extension agents interview potential volunteers for positions that involve more intense contact with youth. As the volunteer position relies less on direct contact with youth, there are fewer face-to-face interviews being conducted. Although schoolteachers have direct contact with youth and are delivering 4-H curriculum, it is likely they are not being interviewed due to the previous paid employment screening process that they have completed.

Table 3.
Use of One-on-One Interviews

Volunteer Position	% Agents Interviewing All	Definition of Position
Teen Camp Counselor	81	Teens providing leadership to overnight, residential, or day camp activities.
Organizational Volunteer	56	Individuals serving as the primary communications liaison between the county 4-H professional and the club.
Special Interest Volunteer	49	Individuals who work with a short-term 4-H group.
Project/Activity Volunteer	47	Assist members with projects and/or planning and conducting activities.
Key Leader/Middle Manager	39	Individual who coordinates other volunteers or special events or has and expertise in a particular subject matter.
CarTeens	38	Teens serving in leadership positions teaching their peers about safe driving.
County Committee Volunteer	34	Serves on committee that provides input into the overall county 4-H program.
Project Committee Volunteer	29	Serves on committee that provides input into a specific project area.
School Enrichment Volunteer	22	Individuals, including teachers, who conduct 4-H programs during school.

Until 1993, Ohio's 4-H program generally accepted all individuals showing an interest, with minimal criteria. Adopting volunteer management as an integral component of a traditionally educational profession has proven to be a challenge for the organization. Establishing a structure for face-to-face interviews of all potential volunteers is far removed from what had long been accepted practices of the 4-H Youth Development profession. This research indicates that 38% of 4-H Youth Development agents conduct face-to-face interviews with all potential volunteers.

A number of barriers exist that explain why 4-H Youth Development agents do not conduct one-on-one interviews with all potential volunteers; however, no single barrier is dominant. Primary reasons identified for not conducting individual face-to-face interviews included:

- The professional already knew the individual;

- Volunteer is changing roles;
- The process takes too much time;
- Potential volunteer is a youth; and
- The professional prefers to conduct group interviews.

For many years, 4-H Youth Development professionals may have been under the impression that they had to accept all potential volunteers. In a society increasingly focused on protecting vulnerable service recipients, the practice of not accepting a potential volunteer is acknowledged as an effective program management strategy. Ohio 4-H Youth Development agents have found reason to reject potential volunteers based on information gained from the screening process. In fact, 48% of respondents had rejected a potential volunteer applicant in the past 12 months. Reasons for rejecting an individual included:

- Poor references,
- Past performance,
- Poor match with (an) available position(s),
- Criminal background, and
- The professional sensed the potential volunteer would not work well with youth.

Table 4.
Reasons Potential Volunteer Rejected

Reasons for Rejecting Volunteer in Past 12 Months	Number Indicating*
Have not rejected a potential volunteer	52
Poor references	20
Past performance	15
Poor match with available positions	13
Criminal background	12
Sense volunteer would not do well with youth	9
Poor attitude	7
Lack understanding of youth development	7
Poor interview	6
Lack of perceived commitment	6
Other	6
Not interested in working with youth	5
Lack of knowledge working with youth	4
Poor organizational skills	1
* Respondents could check more than one.	

Implications

The research results indicate that there is a difference between what current literature supports as "best practices" and what volunteer screening tools Ohio 4-H Youth Development Extension agents are actually implementing. Extension administrators, specialists, and others responsible for staff development need to support the implementation of screening tools. Staff development should

include the effective use of volunteer screening tools, supported by research and literature on best practices.

Furthermore, Ohio State University Extension should adopt consistent policy that requires volunteer screening practices be implemented based on position responsibilities. In a large and complex organization such as Ohio State University Extension, the degree of screening should correspond to the level of responsibilities of the potential volunteer. Volunteer screening is an excellent example in 4-H youth development program management where changes in society and research provide support for a change in Extension programming practices.

Ohio State University Extension is constantly faced with changing policies and procedures to comply with legislation or societal trends. The results from this research project provide a base-line understanding of the level of use of screening tools by 4-H Youth Development professionals. As the organization encounters further policy development and change opportunities, this research will serve as a guide for decision making relevant to new policies, procedures and staff development needs.

Based on information on barriers to conducting one-on-one interviews, strategies for overcoming the barriers should be identified, developed, and provided to agents. This would address the need to remove, or at least reduce, the barriers, so that the screening tools will be adopted and used to the fullest extent. The implementation of a comprehensive volunteer screening process will add additional responsibilities to the already "full plate" of Extension agents. The use of trained, experienced volunteers to assist with the implementation of screening tools is a viable option to overcoming some barriers. However, paid staff should remain responsible for the final decision regarding the acceptance and placement of volunteers and be responsible for maintaining files that include sensitive information.

Historically, the focus of volunteer management has been targeted towards the 4-H Youth Development program area. However, Family & Consumer Sciences, Agriculture & Natural Resources, and Community Development professionals are directly working with or recruiting volunteers to work with vulnerable populations. As the organization evolves and vulnerable audiences are engaged by all program areas, volunteer selection must be addressed with all those staff responsible, regardless of program area.

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