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Identification of Volunteer Screening Practices for Selected Ohio Youth Organizations

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Identification of Volunteer Screening Practices for Selected Ohio Youth Organizations

Abstract

This qualitative study identified volunteer screening practices for selected Ohio youth organizations. Programs were selected based on current volunteer screening in place and involvement of adult volunteers giving leadership to youth-focused programs. Eight volunteer coordinators were interviewed using an interview schedule focused on program screening procedures, liability issues, and volunteer responsibilities. Use of selected screening devices, specific volunteer screening policies, and potential volunteer non-acceptance and liability issues were identified as overall patterns from the data. The researcher concluded that screening procedures are being implemented but that additional focus on consistent policies, implementation of advanced screening devices, and strengthening of current practices should be addressed.

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Introduction

Volunteers frequently have a high public visibility on behalf of a nonprofit corporation; they are the persons whom individuals dealing with the nonprofit corporation see first and most often (DeWitt, 1995). Organizations are becoming more aware of legal pitfalls associated with poor volunteer management. Administrators are instituting the following volunteer screening practices: position descriptions, applications, interviews, reference checks, motor vehicle record checks, criminal history record checks, psychological tests, medical tests, home visits, and volunteer orientation. Using sound management practices and being aware of volunteer rights and responsibilities provide a solid foundation for an effective volunteer management program (Seevers, Graham, Gamon, & Conklin, 1997).

Today, more than one million nonprofit organizations exist in the United States, including human and social service providers, foundations, associations, civic leagues, and cooperatives (Rypkema, 1996). Organizations all over the U.S. have relied on the services of volunteers to meet the needs of their clientele.

Youth organizations recruit volunteers to coordinate and take part in camping, teaching, transporting, mentoring and counseling activities for young people. Youth programs have become an important part of society because they not only add to the quality of life, but also increase the personal pleasure of the volunteers themselves (Ellis & Noyes, 1990).

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe the volunteer screening procedures used by administrators of selected youth organizations. The objectives were to: (a) describe the types of

volunteer screening procedures used by the selected youth organizations; (b) identify liability issues encountered by volunteer administrators when implementing volunteer screening procedures; and (c) describe the types of volunteer responsibilities of the identified organizations.

A qualitative methodology was selected to obtain in-depth information and capture what subjects have to say in their own words. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative data show more in-depth information about a case or individual than do quantitative data, which tend to summarize information based on numbers and statistics.

Final determination of the eight selected organizations was based on conversations with volunteer coordinators assessing if volunteer screening procedures were in place, the level of involvement of adult volunteers, and geographic proximity to the researcher. Of the original 10 organizations contacted, the following participated in the study:

- 4-H Youth Development,
- Big Brothers/Big Sisters,
- Boys and Girls Clubs,
- Girl Scouts,
- Camp Fire Boys & Girls,
- New Directions for Youth,
- The American Red Cross, and
- The Upper Arlington Lutheran Church.

Administrators agreeing to participate in the study were interviewed in a face-to-face setting using an interview schedule consisting of 21 open-ended questions, each with necessary probes to increase level of understanding.

Findings

Table 1 outlines the current practices of the eight organizations as they relate to the use of the seven identified screening procedures.

Table 1
Number of Organizations Using Each Screening Tool for All Potential Volunteers

Screening Tool	Number of Organizations Using for All Potential Volunteers
Position Description	8
Application	7
Reference Check	6
Interview	6
Motor Vehicle Record Check	4
Criminal History Record Check	3
Home Visit	2

Volunteer Screening Policies

Six of the participating organizations have written volunteer screening procedures in place for all potential volunteers. Screening procedures were widely distributed to paid staff, but were made available, on a limited basis, to potential volunteers. Seven organizations use the same procedures for all potential volunteers, regardless of their level of contact with youth. Of the eight organizations, four place all screening responsibility on paid staff, while the remaining organizations have the potential for volunteer involvement. The amount of training or orientation associated with volunteer screening varied from formal, national workshops to local sessions, one-on-one conversations, or reading books and articles.

Volunteer Acceptance or Non-Acceptance

Participating organizations identified several concerns that might slow the screening process or completely disqualify a potential candidate. The concerns included: (a) refusal to supply all requested information or meeting minimum requirements; (b) felony charges or extraneous comments; and (c) incomplete applications. Administrators identified the following as reasons to not accept potential volunteers: (a) engagement in illegal activities, such as pedophilia, drug trafficking, or other criminal activity; (b) conflict with organizational mission; and (c) level of commitment and behaviors of potential volunteers. Legal counsel has been involved with six administrators in the decision making process regarding volunteer acceptance.

Impact of Volunteer Screening

Organizational administrators identified three positive aspects and one negative aspect of having a volunteer screening process in place. In a positive sense, the screening process provided an increased comfort level for parents of youth participants, enhanced the importance of responsibilities, and demonstrated a level of professionalism. At the same time, administrators indicated that a screening process could make the process of engaging a volunteer take too long, thus causing the potential volunteer to lose interest and not follow through with the commitment.

Volunteer Responsibilities

Six of the organizations participating in the study engage volunteers in activities that do not involve long-term, direct contact with a child. Organizations are not permitting volunteers to have access to confidential client information; volunteers are not involved with personal activities of youth; and volunteers are not expected to coach youth in activities in which physical contact between a youth and adult is routine. Volunteers in the selected organizations are involved in the transportation of youth, and, in general, activities take place in group or public settings.

Implications and Recommendations

Based upon the study findings, the researcher suggests the following implications and recommendations directly related to participating organizations.

1. Participating youth organizations that continue to strengthen their volunteer screening procedures will identify individuals who are appropriate role models. The screening process may be the most significant risk management technique for preserving organizational good will (Patterson, 1994).
2. With a lack of professional or formal training identified for those responsible for volunteer screening, administrators will likely face future liability issues. Administrators risk violating such federal legislation as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Age Discrimination Act of 1967, Americans with Disabilities Act, the Fair Credit Reporting Act, and the Employee Polygraph Protection Act of 1988.
3. Continued implementation of position descriptions, applications, reference checks, interviews, and higher level screening procedures will increasingly allow potential volunteers to self-screen themselves because of past criminal activity or a poor match of skills and interest.
4. Potential volunteers are likely to supply needed information in the screening process if adequate reasons are given for requesting the information. Program administrators shared the feelings of Fisher and Cole (1993), who stated that "if the screening process is communicated with empathy, clarity, sensitivity and understanding, volunteer allegiance, performance and commitment can be significantly enhanced."
5. Volunteer administrators will increasingly use the services of legal counsel when selecting volunteers as courts hear more cases and legislators draft additional volunteer related laws. Common mistakes made by administrators, such as irrelevant information requests, arbitrary scrutiny, imprudent use of information, and differential screening, may force potential volunteers to seek legal counsel. Potential new Ohio laws making criminal history record checks mandatory and the federal Volunteer Protection Act of 1997 focusing on volunteers acting within the scope of their duties will change the way volunteers are selected, trained, and engaged in service. Additional time will be spent on criminal background checks, writing position descriptions to outline duties, and conducting meaningful interviews.
6. Potential volunteers are being accepted based on the absence of a criminal background, not on their ability to work with youth. Although volunteers may not have a criminal history, they still may cause physical or emotional harm, steal or damage property, or violate the privacy of a client.
7. Youth programs that do not share screening procedures and expectations with potential volunteers early in the process are likely to face increased frustration and low involvement rates by volunteers.

Recommendations for Further Study

The following recommendations are made for further study related to volunteer screening and selection for nonprofit agencies.

1. A similar study should be conducted to determine the screening procedures, associated liability, and volunteer responsibilities for additional youth programs on state and national levels. Information would be beneficial to newly formed organizations with similar volunteer responsibilities. Results would also assist in determining if organizations are comparing the experience, skills, and characteristics of individuals with the qualifications required for the

position (Fisher & Cole, 1993).

2. Individual youth programs should conduct studies to determine the level of implementation of available screening procedures at various program sites under the direction of different administrators. Results would show if volunteers with similar responsibilities were being screened differently, which is one of the mistakes commonly made by nonprofit organizations (Patterson, 1994). Programs implementing inconsistent screening procedures for similar responsibilities face potential differential screening charges.
3. Further research is needed to identify volunteers' perceptions of screening procedures. Arbitrary, intrusive, and unfair treatment may cause bad publicity and irreparable damage to an organization's reputation (Rypkema, 1996). Research results would identify potentially harmful screening practices that could cause harm to organizations, clients, or volunteers.
4. Research is needed to determine the effectiveness of volunteer screening implementation. Are screening procedures forcing the potential volunteer population to increase, decrease, or remain the same? If the screening process is communicated with empathy, clarity, sensitivity, and understanding, volunteer allegiance, performance, and commitment can be significantly enhanced (Fisher & Cole, 1993). Organizations would be able to determine the most effective method of communicating screening procedures to maximize recruitment efforts.
5. Agencies in which volunteers are assigned to work with vulnerable clients must attempt to determine the suitability and safety of those individuals (McCurley, 1994). Further study should be conducted to include programs using adult volunteers that serve vulnerable populations such as the frail, elderly, or disabled. Results would benefit a larger population of nonprofit organizations as volunteer screening is further scrutinized by legislators and program administrators.
6. Further study should be conducted to identify screening procedures for youth volunteers that work with other youth, such as camp staff, coaches, or mentors. Organizations face charges of differential screening or arbitrary scrutiny if the procedures and requirements for volunteer selection are different for youth and adults, yet their responsibilities are similar.

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