2016

Volunteer Screening Trends & Best Practices Report: 2016

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS EDITION

Verified Volunteers
A SterlingBackcheck Company

Introduction

In May 2015, Verified Volunteers conducted a survey of nonprofit organizations to examine screening practices, objectives and trends. A total of 352 organizations, including Verified Volunteers clients and those from an external panel, responded to the survey. Religious organizations accounted for 29% of survey respondents.

STRUCTURE AND RESOURCES

The resulting report, Volunteer Screening Trends & Best Practices Report 2016, revealed some compelling statistical differences between religious organizations and all other types of nonprofits in terms of how they operate:

+ Religious organizations **spent an average of 8.5% of their budget on volunteer screening,** while other organizations spent 11.3%.

+ **Only 54% of religious organizations had a formal training program** for volunteers, whereas 77% of other organizations had implemented formal training.

+ Religious organizations **had the highest percentage of frequent volunteers** (those who volunteer regularly) compared to other types of nonprofit organizations.

+ Religious organizations had fewer volunteers. **Nearly 7 in 10 religious organizations reported fewer than 50 volunteers serving their assemblage.** The majority of organizations in other sectors had more than 50 volunteers.

+ **Religious organizations had smaller annual budgets in 2014** compared to those in other sectors. Over half of religious organizations reported a budget of less than $500,000.

+ Of the respondents representing religious organizations, **47% had been in their current role for 10 or more years.** Only 22% of those representing non-religious organizations had been in their current role for at least 10 years.

Screening Practices

The results also revealed areas where religious organizations could improve their screening practices in terms of accuracy, efficiency, and cost. In general, religious organizations conduct fewer background checks on their volunteers than other organizations and they place confidence in searches that are incomplete and outdated. Furthermore, less than half of religious organizations screen all volunteers and elect to only rescreen them on some occasions, putting their people, assets and reputation at risk.

This whitepaper explores these unique differences, why they exist, and how religious organizations can benefit from a more thorough volunteer screening program.

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I am so pleased that we chose Verified Volunteers as the exclusive volunteer screening vendor for World Meeting of Families 2015 - Philadelphia. We were all so highly impressed with the speed with which our 10,000 volunteers were able to be onboarded and screened. The exceptional level of customer service provided by the Advocates helped minimize calls for my team and provided an additional level of service for this historical event. What's more, our volunteers loved the easy-to-use platform and completely online process. That's saying a lot!

- Director of Volunteer Services, World Meeting of Families

Current State of Volunteer Screening

WHO GETS SCREENED

Out of the pool of all nonprofit organizations running volunteer programs, religious organizations are least likely to screen all volunteers. Other types of organizations are significantly more likely to screen volunteers all of the time.

Religious Organizations

All of the time 43.1%

Some of the time 56.9%

Other Organizations

All of the time 63.2%

Some of the time 36.8%
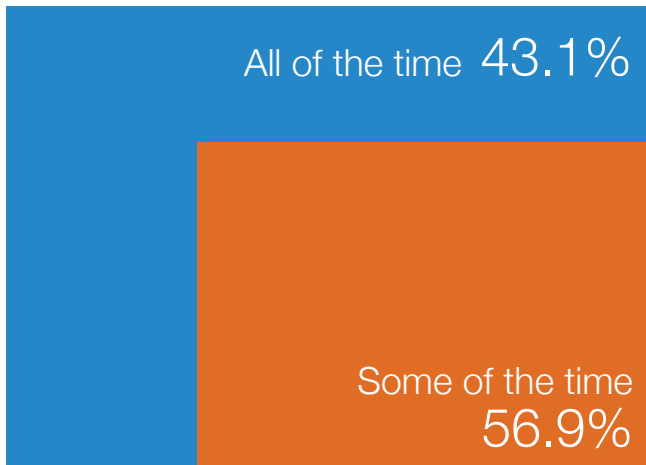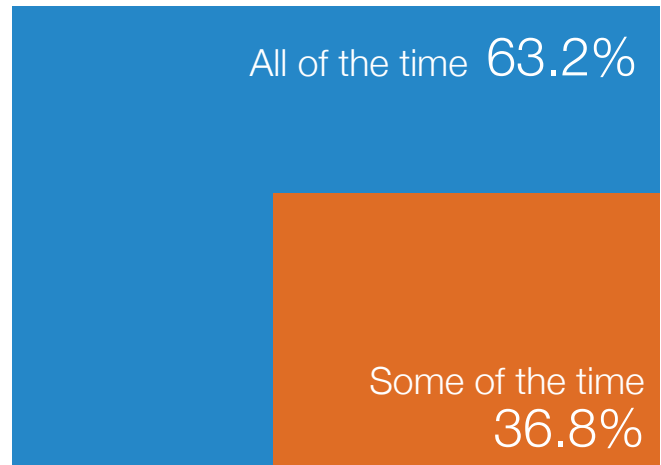
RISKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Religious organizations are least likely to say that they serve vulnerable populations, such as children, the elderly, and the disabled. Although their assemblages may not be primarily comprised of vulnerable populations, members who do fall under that category are extremely susceptible to harm. For example, many religious organizations host activities such as youth nights, retreats, or fundraisers where children may be left without a parent or guardian. This opens them up to major risks.

In most cases, religious organizations focus their screening efforts on volunteers who work with vulnerable populations. That might be okay, except that they are screening the volunteers that work with vulnerable populations just some of the time. This can be attributed to a lack of financial resources to conduct adequate screening or perhaps even the longevity of their volunteer base and perceived safety of a volunteer who has been a member of the organization for many years. While understandable, in many cases, screening volunteers can help organizations save money (see Challenges section on page 11) so more research
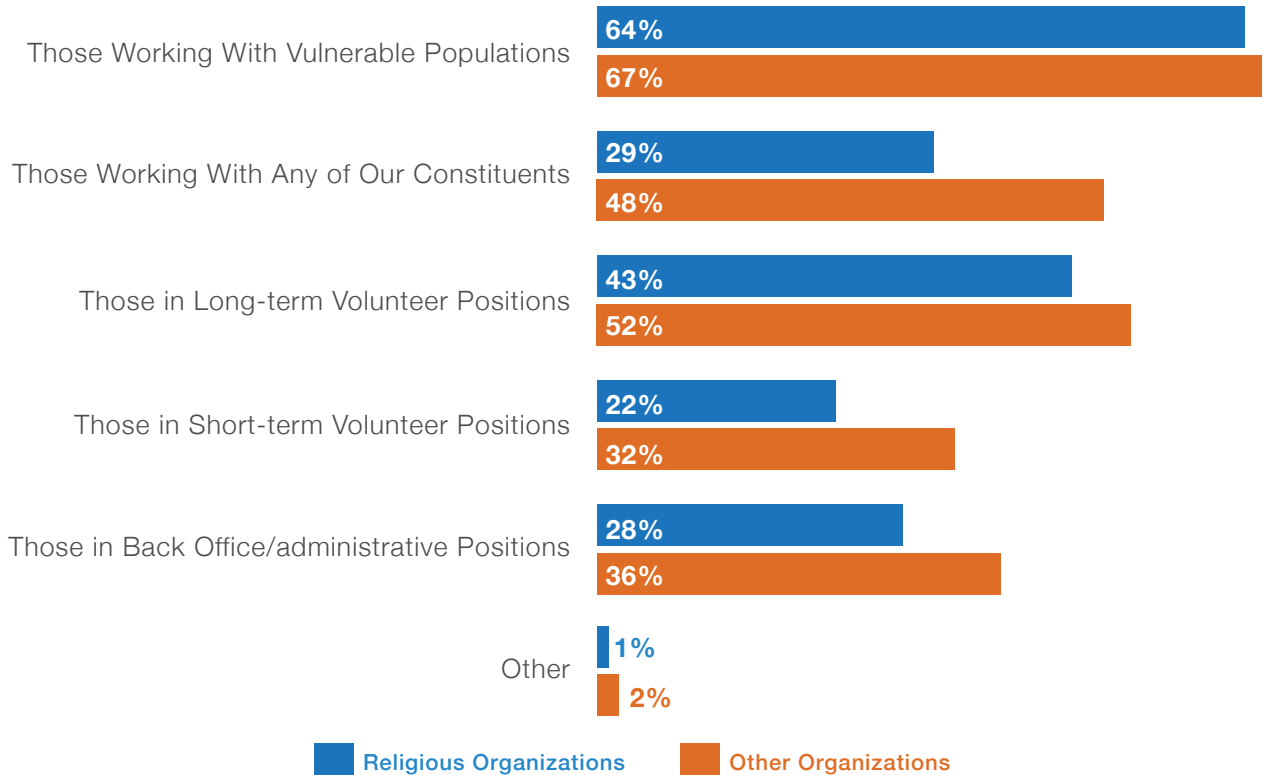
should be conducted before assuming comprehensive screening is just not affordable. And simply "knowing" a person is not good enough. Organizations need to be certain about an individual's criminal history in order to make an educated determination as to whether they should volunteer and in which positions.

Back to the question of who to screen. Screening those who work with vulnerable groups is a good practice, but organizations must realize that other volunteers can impact their reputation and assemblage. As a best practice, organizations should expand their screening program to cover all volunteers, regardless of their level and duration of involvement with the organization. Again, it is not a good practice to guess at someone's history – there is too much on the line. If organizations simply cannot screen all volunteers all of the time, they should at least mitigate risk by ensuring those volunteers who are not screened are not placed in roles where they come into contact with vulnerable populations or have access to financial information or personal records of any sort.

FREQUENCY OF RESCREENING

Across all positions and responsibilities, religious organizations conduct fewer renewal background checks on volunteers than average. Where religious organizations fall short the most is when rescreening those in short-term volunteer positions or those working with any constituents.

Who Renewal Checks are Conducted For

Category	Religious Organizations	Other Organizations
Those Working With Vulnerable Populations	64%	67%
Those Working With Any of Our Constituents	29%	48%
Those in Long-term Volunteer Positions	43%	52%
Those in Short-term Volunteer Positions	22%	32%
Those in Back Office/administrative Positions	28%	36%
Other	1%	2%

■ Religious Organizations   ■ Other Organizations

RISKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chart illustrates that religious organizations conduct fewer renewal checks for volunteers in all positions across the board, exposing them to more risk than other organizations.

The biggest reason why religious organizations conduct fewer checks than other organizations is likely due to budget constraints. Although screening is critical to managing volunteers and keeping an organization and those it serves safe, there is still a cost involved. Religious organizations should explore screening options and providers that offer more efficient and affordable screening options — such as volunteer contributions and flexible payment options. Specifically,

they should seek out providers that focus on volunteer screening.

Organizations should also think about their volunteers as an investment. It costs money to run a volunteer program but, if it's run efficiently, the value of volunteer hours far outweighs the costs involved. Calculate the return on your volunteer program using this Return on Volunteer Investment Calculator.

HOW SCREENING IS CONDUCTED

Three in 10 religious organizations perform their volunteer screening in-house instead of using a third-party provider or going directly to a government source. This is much higher than the average (13%) for other organizations.

How Screening is Performed

	Third-Party Service	In-House	Government Source
Religious Organizations	57%	30%	13%
Other Organizations	74%	13%	13%

■ Religious Organizations   ■ Other Organizations
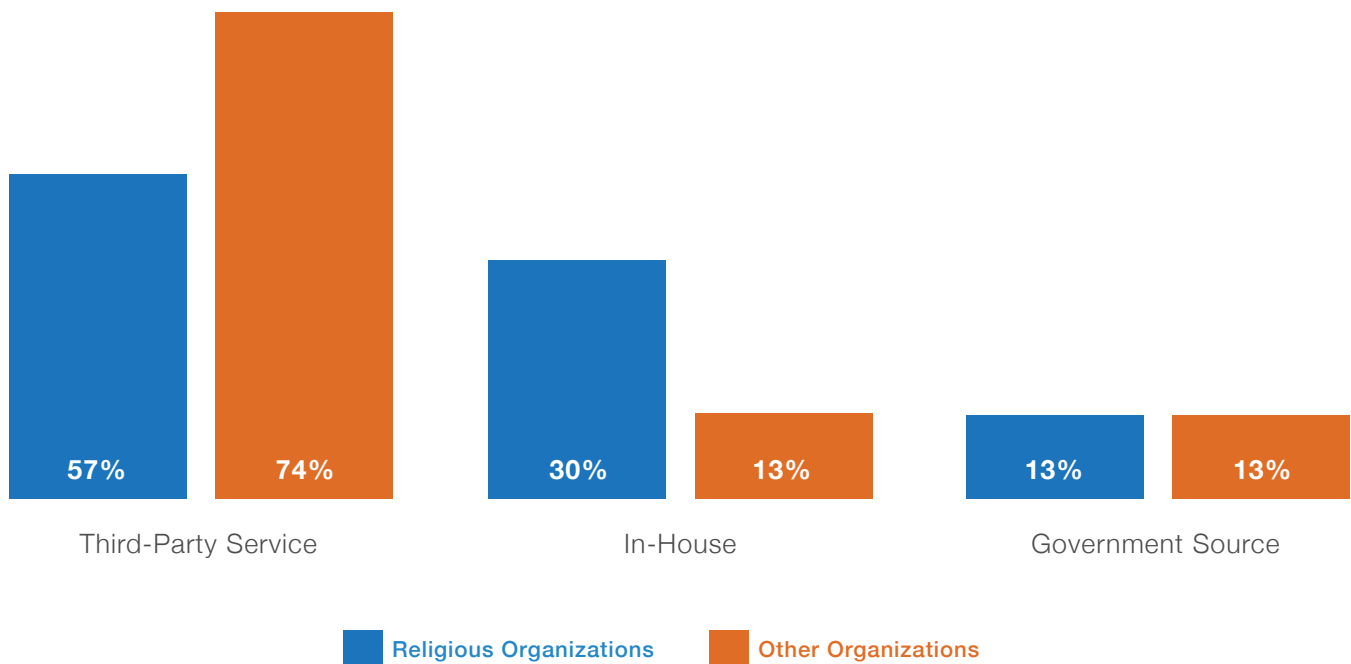
RISKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Not surprisingly, this higher use of in-house resources for volunteer screening has resulted in challenges for many religious organizations. More religious organizations cited their biggest screening challenge as the time and administration spent on screening. A total of 42% of religious organizations expressed this sentiment, as opposed to only 36% of other organizations.
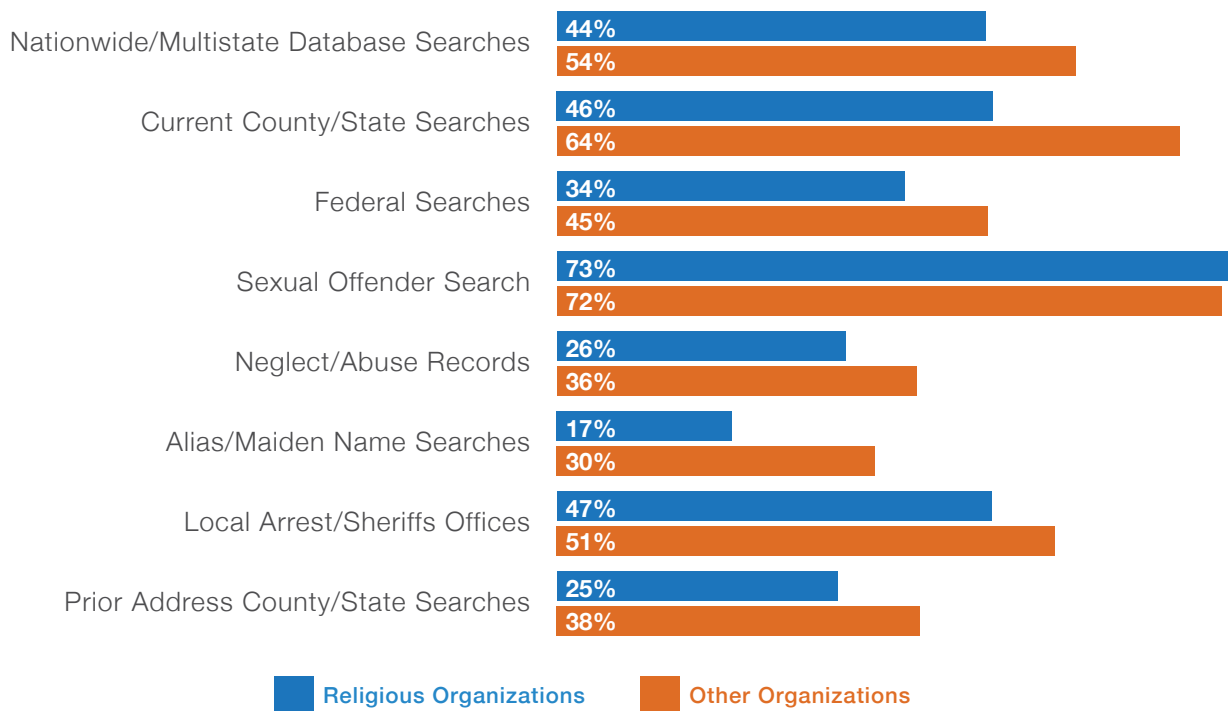
Religious organizations should engage a qualified provider that is proficient at volunteer screening. When factoring in time, training, and administration, conducting screening in-house is often more expensive than using a provider.

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS ARE MORE EXPOSED TO RISK

Conducting thorough background checks is imperative for all nonprofit organizations, including those within the religious sector. Volunteer screening provides organizations with more background insight on their volunteers so they can decide whether or not the individual is suitable to work with them. In some cases, volunteers may not be qualified for certain positions. For example, a volunteer who has exhibited poor financial decisions in their personal life may not be the most suitable volunteer to act as treasurer, but there may be other non-financial positions that are more appropriate.

Verified Volunteer's Volunteer **Screening Trends & Best Practices Report 2016** revealed that religious organizations conduct the fewest background checks and renewal checks on their volunteers. When screening for criminal convictions, religious organizations also use fewer types of criminal record checks, as demonstrated in the chart below.

Types of Criminal Record Searches Conducted

Search Type	Religious Organizations	Other Organizations
Nationwide/Multistate Database Searches	44%	54%
Current County/State Searches	46%	64%
Federal Searches	34%	45%
Sexual Offender Search	73%	72%
Neglect/Abuse Records	26%	36%
Alias/Maiden Name Searches	17%	30%
Local Arrest/Sheriffs Offices	47%	51%
Prior Address County/State Searches	25%	38%

■ Religious Organizations   ■ Other Organizations

RISKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Volunteer screening isn't as easy as checking one database to clear a volunteer. Multiple data sources should be used to screen and rescreen volunteers.

There is no magical formula or combination of searches that combine to form an infallible background check. In a perfect world, organizations would conduct every type of criminal record check on every volunteer; however, other factors such as a limited budget get in the way. The best solution is to carefully consider each search and determine which types will provide the most value. For example, the first time you screen a volunteer you may decide to investigate previous residential jurisdictions; however, for subsequent criminal record checks on the same volunteer, a search of only the current county and state would be sufficient.

Additionally, the laws and regulations surrounding background checks vary from state-to-state, and even among municipalities. Organizations can save themselves the time, administration, and headache of volunteer screening by using a reputable screening provider.

Why Screen

Religious organizations conduct background checks primarily to provide a safe environment for their assemblage and the various populations they serve. They are significantly less likely to be concerned with improving the quality of volunteers or increasing volunteer retention than organizations in other sectors.

While every organization has different objectives in mind when performing volunteer screening, there are a number of reasons organizations of all types should screen their volunteers thoroughly.

WHY IT'S IMPERATIVE THAT RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS SCREEN THEIR VOLUNTEERS

Religious organizations are places of faith, sanctuary, and safety. There is an expected sense of trust and community throughout their assemblage, all of which can be compromised with one single catastrophic event. As discussed in Verified Volunteers' white paper: **Counting the Cost of a Bad Volunteer,** one bad apple in the volunteer pool can put an entire organization at risk. As such, organizations must take the appropriate measures to preserve and uphold their trusted position and reputation within the community.

Volunteer background checks protect religious organizations in the following ways:

1. People – Religious organizations are expected to foster a safe environment, shielded from violence or abuse. Although they don't just serve vulnerable populations, many of those they serve fall into that category. Children, the elderly, and the disabled are all considered vulnerable populations and organizations should take reasonable measures to protect them. Thorough criminal record checks identify individuals with abusive or violent pasts so organizations can minimize the risks of harm to their people and reputation.

2. Assets - Religious organizations go to great lengths to fundraise and secure the money they need to operate. It would be devastating if those funds were stolen or consumed by defending a lawsuit, especially if the incident could have been prevented with volunteer screening. Many religious organizations have other assets too, such as real estate, vehicles and equipment. Criminal record checks help organizations identify volunteers who have criminal histories involving fraud or theft, while credit checks identify those who have demonstrated poor financial responsibility. Depending on the severity of any convictions or bad credit history, organizations may simply wish to place the volunteer in a position that does not require the handling or management of assets.

3. Reputation - An organization's reputation plays a huge role in their overall success, from growing their assemblage to fundraising efforts. One negative incident involving a volunteer can generate enough bad press to spoil a good reputation that has taken years to build. Losing the community's faith can have a devastating impact on an organization. By protecting against harm to their people and assets, organizations can also uphold and maintain their reputation.

Screening volunteers is one of the most important steps religious organizations can take to preserve their reputation, provide a safe environment for the people they serve, and protect their assets in order to remain a vital part of their communities. For more on how to effectively manage risk for nonprofit organizations, please refer to Verified Volunteer's white paper: Risk Management for Your Volunteer Program: 2015-2016.

Tips for Improved Volunteer Screening

Not all criminal record checks are created equal – some are more thorough than others, but none are perfect. It is important that organizations understand the differences between the various types of criminal record checks and how thorough, up-to-date, and accurate they truly are.

SCREENING ALL VOLUNTEERS IS ESSENTIAL

As the least likely to screen volunteers all of the time, religious organizations need to consider revisiting their policies to expand their screening efforts. All volunteers are representatives of their respective assemblages and their actions can have a negative impact on reputation and safety. While every volunteer should be screened to some degree, the extent of screening may vary based on the volunteer's position or responsibilities. For example, if a volunteer will work with a vulnerable population, such as children, the elderly, or the disabled, then organizations may want to screen to a higher standard, including a search of the National Sex Offender Public Website (Dru Sjodin) to determine if the volunteer is listed on any sex offender registries across the nation.

NATIONWIDE SEARCHES ARE NOT ENOUGH

Over half (55%) of religious organizations were unaware of nationwide and multistate database searches prior to completing the Verified Volunteers survey. However, the majority believe that these types of searches are thorough, up-to-date, and accurate.

Confidence that nationwide and multistate databases are...

Thorough   67%
Up-to-Date   57%
Accurate   58%

Nationwide and multistate databases are actually one of the least thorough, least accurate, and most outdated criminal record checks available.

In 2015, Verified Volunteers screened hundreds of thousands of volunteers. For those volunteers screened using the Complete Package, we returned double the percentage of hits than we would have found if using a nationwide search alone.

They are helpful when used as a locator tool to identify which jurisdictions to search at the primary source, but they should not be used as a standalone search. In 2015, Verified Volunteers screened hundreds of thousands of volunteers. For those volunteers screened using the Complete Package, we returned double the percentage of hits than we would have found if using a nationwide search alone. For those volunteers screened using the Complete Package, we returned double the percentage of hits than we would have found if using a nationwide search alone. They are helpful when used as a locator tool to identify which jurisdictions to search at the primary source, but they should not be used as a standalone search.

USE MULTIPLE SEARCHES TO MAXIMIZE VALUE

Among all nonprofits, religious organizations used the fewest number of criminal record checks to screen volunteers. On average, religious organizations use three different criminal record searches to screen volunteers, whereas other organizations use an average of four.

The more searches used to screen volunteers, the more thorough and accurate the background check will be. When organizations rely on one sole source for their criminal record information, there is a good chance that their background checks may be missing vital information.

RESCREENING IS OF EQUAL IMPORTANCE

Rescreening is also an area of concern for religious organizations as they are the least likely to conduct renewal checks in all scenarios. Renewal checks are just as important as the initial check as volunteers may get into trouble during the course of their volunteer term. If possible, organizations should aim to rescreen volunteers annually.

Types of Criminal Record Checks

The first thing that organizations must understand is the difference between primary source information and database searches. Primary source criminal data may only be obtained directly from where it originated, such as a county or state courthouse. Database searches of any type, including those offered by government sources, are not considered primary source and therefore, may not be up-to-date or accurate.

Alias/Maiden Name Search

Based on any aliases or maiden names that the volunteer has used at one time or another. Aliases and maiden names are uncovered through an SSN Trace.

County/State Residence Criminal Search (Current)

Based on the volunteer's current county and state of residence. Criminal record checks are conducted at the primary source of information (i.e. the state or county courthouse).

County/State Search(es) – 7 Years of Address History

Based on the volunteer's residential address history for the previous 7 years. Jurisdictions where the volunteer has lived are searched at the primary source.

Nationwide Criminal History Search

Based on a database that contains criminal records from a number of criminal information sources across all 50 states. Information is limited and since nationwide searches are not exhaustive, they are best used as a supplement to a primary source criminal record check.

National 50 State Sex Offender Registry Search (Dru Sjodin/NSOPW)

Based on the only up-to-date, comprehensive source of sex offender information. Contains sex offender records for all 50 states; however, it is the responsibility of each jurisdiction to keep their records accurate.

Validation

Any record that is located via a database (i.e. Nationwide Criminal History Search or National 50 State Sex Offender Registry) must be validated at the primary source of information. This means confirming the details and accuracy of the record directly with the state or county courthouse.

Challenges

Volunteer screening, especially when conducted in-house, comes along with its fair share of challenges. Religious organizations ranked the most challenging aspects of volunteer screening as follows:

1. **Time and administration spent on screening (42.2%)**
2. **Expense of screening or not enough budget (26.5%)**
3. Repeat screening for volunteers coming from other organizations **(10.8%)**
4. Poor volunteer experience **(4.9%)**
5. Getting volunteers to complete the screening process **(3.9%)**
6. Low quality checks **(1.0%)**

The remaining 10.7% reported other challenges or no challenges with volunteer screening.

OVERCOMING SCREENING CHALLENGES

The most challenging aspects of volunteer screening for religious organizations are time consumption and lack of budget. Many organizations see these two challenges as a trade-off. The perception is that using a third-party provider costs more, but saves time. As such, organizations believe that by conducting volunteer screening in-house, it will save them money. In some cases, religious organizations have opted to only screen certain volunteers in an effort to balance risk and cost. For organizations that do not screen all of their volunteers, additional information regarding why it's imperative to start can be found in Verified Volunteer's white paper: To Screen or Not to Screen?

The perception that usually a third-party provider costs more is actually a misperception. Using a third-party provider delivers more thorough background checks and actually saves organizations money in the long run. An in-house background check may be cheaper on the surface, but more often than not, they are less comprehensive and miss critical information.

Religious organizations uncover the fewest criminal convictions through their background checks than all other organizations. In fact, 56% of religious organizations did not locate any misdemeanor or felony convictions. This lower than average hit-rate could indicate that the level of screening may be inadequate, missing key criminal records that could be putting them at risk.

TIPS FOR OFFSETTING THE COST OF SCREENING

Religious organizations had the smallest budgets in 2014, so cost is certainly a concern when it comes to screening volunteers. One way to offset the cost of screening is to ask volunteers to share or contribute to their own volunteer background check.

Some religious organizations have considered this option. About 5% of them said they plan to pay for a larger portion of volunteer background checks. Many organizations might be surprised to find out that many volunteers will gladly pay for all or part of their check when provided with the option to do so. The Verified Volunteers screening platform allows organizations to voluntarily contribute to the cost of their background check. Volunteers may elect to pay for a portion, but many choose to pay for the entire background check. In the first quarter of 2014, 40% of the costs of background checks on the Verified Volunteers platform were paid for by volunteers. Additionally, of the volunteers who opted to contribute, they covered on average 91% of the total cost.

Contact Verified Volunteers for More Information

Contact Verified Volunteers to learn more about how background screening can help protect your organization. The Verified Volunteers platform is designed specifically for nonprofit organizations and can help transition volunteer screening into an easy, convenient process.

About Verified Volunteers

Verified Volunteers helps nonprofit organizations gain confidence in the volunteers working with those they serve by delivering thorough, compliant background checks. By enabling volunteers to order, manage and share their background checks via a secure online platform, we create a community of vetted volunteers and help nonprofit organizations save time and money. Our extensive expertise in screening and compliance best practices help clients recruit the best volunteers in order to maintain a safe environment and positive reputation. Verified Volunteers is backed by SterlingBackcheck, the world's largest background screening company and partnered with Points of Light, the world's largest organization dedicated to volunteer service. Visit verifiedvolunteers.com or engage with us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or LinkedIn to learn more.

SOME OF THE ORGANIZATIONS THAT VERIFIED VOLUNTEERS HAS WORKED WITH:
+ **Catholic Charities USA**
+ **Association of Jewish Family & Children's Agencies (AJFCA)**
+ **World Meeting of Families – 2015 Philadelphia**
+ **Archdiocese of Newark**
+ **Timberline Church**
+ **Baha'i Faith**

USEFUL RESOURCES

Report: Volunteer Screening Trends & Best Practices 2016

Case Study: Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children (CASA)

Case Study: The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Newark (RCAN)

Return on Volunteer Investment Calculator

NEWS RELATED TO POPE FRANCIS' 2015 U.S. VISIT

Volunteers Being Screened for Pope's Visit

Pope Francis Philadelphia Visit: 9,000 Volunteers Signed Up For September Celebration

Volunteers for Pope Francis Philadelphia Visit Put Through Rigorous Background Checks

Papal Screening and Training Under Way in Philadelphia and Beyond

6,000 Volunteers Ready to Lend Many Hands This September