**Topic 9b: Screening Issues & Volunteers**

**Volunteer Screening**

By Charles Tremper and Gwynne Kostin

From No Surprises: Harmonizing Risk and Reward in Volunteer Management, 2nd ed.

Excerpted with permission from *No Surprises: Harmonizing Risk and Reward in Volunteer Management, 2nd ed,*by Charles Tremper and Gwynne Kostin,    2001, Nonprofit Risk Management Center.

**Student Preparation Required:**

* None

**Information**

Unless you accept everyone who walks in off the street, (and some ARES teams apparently do!) you are already screening. Using a structured procedure replaces haphazard, and potentially arbitrary, decisions with a fair and defensible method. Methodical screening doesn't eliminate reliance on your gut feeling; you may subconsciously pick up clues about a candidate's suitability. You can leave room for intuition in your selection process, but use it as a basis for further inquiry.

As the sensitivity of the volunteer assignment increases, the need for multiple and more thorough screening procedures rises. At the low risk end of the spectrum is a volunteer who assists each week in copying and filing newspaper clippings or someone who helps organize groceries for the food bank. At the high risk end is a guardian for an elderly person with Alzheimer's disease or a mentor for a child in a program involving unsupervised overnight visits at the mentor's home.

Using multiple screens increases your chance of finding the best volunteers and rejecting the worst. Layered screening procedures may expose people who aren't telling the truth by revealing inconsistent responses. In addition, the thoroughness of the process may discourage applicants with something to hide.

Some people are afraid that extensive screening will scare away potential volunteers. Fortunately, many successful programs have demonstrated that thorough screening can be done. Most candidates will understand the reason for a thorough process when you explain your organization's concern that clients be served and protected. Once again, open communication is key.

When dealing with vulnerable populations screening volunteers before placement is not enough! Research in other non-profits has found that convicted child abusers were amazed at how readily they were placed. They were even more amazed that they were unsupervised as they carried out their volunteer work while sexually abusing children.

While ARES hopefully is not faced with similar situations, we still need to build ongoing volunteer screening, supervision, training, and evaluation into our programs.

**Screening Guidelines**

* Use the position description to evaluate the responsibilities of and supervision for the position. This analysis provides the basis for developing appropriate screening procedures.
* Gather all of your data before making a judgment. If something seems fishy to you, ask the applicant for an explanation. Be sensitive to cultural differences and your own assumptions. Remember, the goal is to recruit the best people, even if they aren't just like you.
* Ask the same question in different ways and get information from multiple sources. Later on you can line up all the answers and see if the dates and locations match.
* Include others in the process. One person may pick up signals that the other misses. Consider peer interviews or group sessions. Caveat: Limit the number of eyes that have access to sensitive or private information. Only those with a legitimate need to know should review any personal records, for example.
* Don't be in a hurry. Sometimes the most important information is shared only after the scripted dialogue ends.
* Be realistic. Be flexible. Weigh the thoroughness of the screening technique against the responsibility of the position.
* Don't collect information you can't evaluate. Ask yourself what you will do with the information. Some organizations set up elaborate interviewing processes or use personal-style tests such as Myers-Briggs and don't know an E-N-F-P (extroverted, intuition, feeling, perceiving) from a J-E-R-K!
* Make sure the information you gather is really necessary and appropriate to the duties.
* Be consistent. If background checks are important enough for some volunteers, they are equally important for *all*volunteers performing the same tasks. Failing to screen board members, prominent citizens, or others assumed to be suitable invites disaster.

Every screening technique has pluses and minuses. Don't make the mistake of believing that a person or program is too valuable to let thorough screening get in the way. Although time taken in screening procedures may seem daunting, keep your focus on protecting the people you serve and fulfilling the team's mission.

**References**

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**Review**

Screening of ARES volunteers ranges from elaborate to non-existent. Yet some level of screening is important, not only for the protection of the program, but also in placing the volunteer in the right job with the right background to succeed. The better screening processes for ARES involve more than one person and take time - but it is worth it.

**Student Activities**

1a. Make up a list of screening questions you believe should be asked of an amateur operator

who shows up unknown to you, but wants to join your ARES team.

1b. Role-play asking your questions with a member of your team. How does it feel? Adjust your

script accordingly so that you are comfortable with it, yet getting information you need.

**Topic 9 Section B Knowledge Review**

In order to demonstrate mastery of the information presented in the topic, you will be asked a series of un-graded questions. There are approximately 5 questions on the following pages in multiple-choice or true/false format. Feedback will be offered to you based on the answer you provide. In some cases, you may be directed back to the area of the topic where a review might benefit you in order to find the correct answer.

Question 1

You do not need to have a screening interview with an incoming volunteer who is:

1. a licensed ham.
2. a local politician.
3. known to you from high school.
4. none of the above.

Question 2

Screening interviews should be:

1. done quickly and efficiently.
2. getting as much information as possible from the person.
3. held on a 1:1 basis only.
4. relaxed and may take time.

Question 3

The use of testing and background checking:

1. is required by some volunteer organizations.
2. always leads to correct placements.
3. gives results which can be shared among the team.
4. is required for ARES membership.

Question 4

True or False: Screening potential candidates ensures they will perform appropriately in any situation your ARES unit encounters.

* True
* False

Question 5

True or False: A thorough screening may well discourage an applicant that has something to hide.

* True
* False

**Correct Answers**

1 d

2 d

3 a

4 false

5 true