

Background Screening in Youth Sports

Compiled by the National Alliance for Youth Sports



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Introduction

The National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) periodically releases updates to its document *Background Screening in Youth Sports*. This edition addresses recent changes that have occurred which requires NAYS to re-examine industry information, screening protocols, and sample procedures, along with documents that are collected and analyzed.

Today, most youth sports organizations require volunteers to undergo some form of background screening. However, without a standard screening protocol, some organizations are struggling with a lack of resources and knowledge necessary to conduct background checks on their potential volunteers, including coaches, officials and administrators. Understanding the complexities of what a thorough background check entails is an important challenge to overcome for many organizations.

Additionally, a majority of public entities – parks and recreation agencies – are doing some form of background checks on their volunteers. Nevertheless, there are major variations in the methods currently used, and of great concern is volunteer, parent-run youth leagues that may or may not be screening their volunteers.

In an effort to develop consistency, this document presents information that is applicable to any youth sports volunteer in any youth sports organization. These guidelines will 1) outline the components of thorough volunteer youth sports screening; 2) outline the process to determine eligibility and the factors that can disqualify an individual from serving as a youth sports volunteer; and 3) provide samples of essential documents that every youth sports organization must utilize to screen volunteers.

Components of a Thorough Volunteer Screening Process to Determine Eligibility

To ensure all children affected by a youth sports organization receive the highest quality experience, the organization has a responsibility to select the most qualified individuals; and those who understand the organization's goals and who will not create risks for the organization. Equally as important, the organization must exclude individuals that have certain criminal histories or who may increase the level of acceptable risk to the organization overall.

The concept of "due diligence" must be embraced by youth sports organizations. This refers to the complete and careful effort made to investigate a potential volunteer's background. It is the organization's responsibility to identify and exclude volunteers who pose risks to young athletes.

There are **five components** to follow when thoroughly screening potential volunteers:

1. Application Form – An application form must be completed for all volunteer positions. Required information should include name, address, references and employers. Every potential volunteer must complete the form, regardless of how long they have been associated or how in need the organization is for "warm bodies" to fill positions. Applications should be signed and dated by each potential volunteer. A copy of their driver's license or state issued identification and social security card should be attached to their completed application form.

2. Information and Reference Check – Be sure to review all information to ensure the application matches information collected and check references provided on the application

form. Look carefully for any inconsistencies, gaps in time, frequent moves, etc. Don't assume that just because all the information on the form looks legitimate that it is – verify everything.

3. Conduct Interviews – Interview the potential volunteer. First impressions and gut reactions are important. Some organizations will opt for short telephone interviews while others will utilize a more formal approach depending on the number of volunteers needed. Since the majority of volunteers will have a child in the program, many organizations conduct a short interview during the registration process. A good time to ask some questions and make some notes on their application form is when the parent registers their child and has agreed to potentially volunteer. Consider developing a standard interview routine to save time and allow for consistency.

4. Conduct a Criminal History Background Check – Today a thorough Criminal History Background Check includes the following components:

- **Validate volunteer identity** using the information collected from the application. Criminal and Sex Offender records in the U.S. are filed using name and date of birth (DOB) as identifiers. It is imperative that your organization knows the complete “legal name” and DOB of each applicant. This information will be gathered during the application process by requiring potential volunteers to provide their driver’s license/state issued identification and social security number.
- **Sex Offender Registry (SOR)** search. Sex offenders who have completed their criminal sentences are required to “register” to track where they live and their activities. The information included within the SOR is made available to the general public via a variety of websites. The most up-to-date and accurate data source is the U.S. Department of Justice National Sex Offender Public Website. Many sex offenders do comply with the reporting requirements and residency restrictions. However, some do NOT, so organizations must understand that while checking the SOR is a significant component, it is only one component of a thorough check.
- **National Criminal Database** search. Many databases exist that contain millions of records and summary information about criminal convictions throughout the United States. Information from the database may assist your organization in identifying which courthouses and sex offender registries to search for when looking for records. Like most databases, they include “historical” information making it difficult to provide current or the most up-to-date data. Therefore, utilizing information from a National Criminal Database should be used as a supplement to your County or Statewide Criminal Courthouse search and Sex Offender Registry search.
- **A County or Statewide Criminal** search. Since criminal records are stored at the courthouse and are public information, a County or Statewide Criminal search should be performed. Organizations may outsource to a background check company to conduct the searches or may consider contacting the local police department, sheriff’s office and/or courthouse to request the public information.

5. Compare Results Against Disqualifiers – Once the components above have been completed, the organization must decide if the candidate is a suitable volunteer. Every

reasonable effort should be made to protect youth sports participants from adults in the program who have a history of unacceptable criminal activity.

Disqualifiers for a Potential Volunteer

Be aware that a Criminal History Background Check is just one component of a thorough screening process as there are many people who do not have a criminal history but may be inappropriate for volunteering.

Before conducting a Criminal History Background Check consider the following automatic disqualifiers:

- An applicant provides inaccurate information in their application
- References provide unpleasant or disturbing information about the potential volunteer
- Information gathered in the interview raises questions about the potential volunteer's motives
- The volunteer refuses to complete the screening process

Next, information gathered from the Criminal History Background Check should be used to determine if an applicant has been convicted of any of the following offenses and if so, he or she should not be allowed to work with children:

- Sex offenses and misconduct
- Violent felonies
- Felonies (other than sex or violence related) within the past 10 years
- Any child abuse or domestic violence convictions
- Misdemeanors within the past seven years

Every organization must determine their own specific list of offenses that will eliminate a potential volunteer. Additionally, pending convictions and/or arrests for the above items should also be a factor as organizations determine volunteer eligibility.

Essential Documents for Screening Volunteers

Youth sports organizations are encouraged to review their current documents used during the screening process. Some organizations have comprehensive processes already in place while others may be doing very little. The documents described below are essential to create a standard method for volunteer screening. These documents can be reviewed, combined and/or modified to meet the specific needs of any youth sports organization and should be reviewed periodically.

1. Written Screening Policy

The written policy must be readily available and communicated. It should be required that ALL volunteers with direct involvement with athletes go through the same screening process. A written policy shows the organization's commitment to ensure only the most qualified individuals are involved in the program. It may help to proactively defuse potential conflict resulting from misunderstandings or miscommunication. Even if everybody in the organization knows each

other, volunteers should be considered as applicants and should be expected to go through the screening process with no exceptions.

2. Job Descriptions

The job description provides a detailed outline of the responsibilities and duties of each volunteer position. A well-crafted job description reduces risk in organizations by establishing boundaries for what the volunteer should or should not do, focusing and communicating the qualifications for the job, and providing documentation if it is necessary to show that the volunteer was acting outside of their responsibilities. Volunteers should be required to sign a copy and be provided a copy for their records.

3. Consent/Release Form

The consent form is necessary to authorize the organization to verify an applicant's information. The consent form is also needed to investigate the individual's background. The consent form must be signed and dated. The presence of the consent form makes it clear that the information on the application will be checked and therefore helps to secure the validity of the information.

4. Application Form

Require ALL volunteers to complete an application form. Applications should be signed and dated by applicants. They should be marked confidential and securely filed with only key administrators in charge of the program having access to the application information. Many organizations also attach a copy of some form of identification (driver's license or state issued identification and social security card) to accompany the application form.

To access sample documents described above, visit the [NAYS website](#).

Other Important Considerations During the Screening Process

- Some states have enacted laws requiring volunteer coaches to be screened. Be sure to check to see if legislation has been passed in your state that requires background checks on volunteers.
- Organizations should conduct follow-up background checks at least every two years on volunteers that continue to serve.
- Document "why" for each decision the organization makes about a volunteer.
- Confidentiality is critical. All information obtained in response to the criminal background check or disclosed in the review process must be kept confidential and not disclosed or discussed outside of the review process. Criminal history files should be secured and maintained separately from any files accessible to the public or unauthorized personnel.
- Some organizations establish a special committee specifically to manage the background check process. This may include deciding on a background check procedure, determining disqualifiers, and putting them in writing; and determining who within the organization will be responsible for reviewing the report, notifying the potential volunteer and managing information.
- Many public entities (parks and recreation departments for example) defer this responsibility to their Human Resources (HR) Department.

Conclusions

Protecting children and the youth sports organization is paramount. While there is no way to be 100 percent certain about any person working in youth sports, be sure to take preventative measures that will lead to a safer experience for all.

- Screening is a pro-active approach to ensure the organization has the right type of volunteers in all positions.
- A comprehensive background check should be conducted on every potential volunteer that has direct involvement with athletes.
- Volunteer screening must be consistent. Abide by your organization's written policies.
- Organizations must never rely on any one factor when determining the competency and safety of a prospective volunteer. There are several criteria a volunteer must meet to be considered suitable to work with children.
- The more steps an organization takes, the thicker its protective shield. In addition to background checks, an organization should provide training, continuous supervision and accountability.