

# BACKGROUND SCREENING

## IN YOUTH SPORTS

2012 Edition



Guidelines compiled by the **National ALLIANCE**  
For Youth Sports

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## *Introduction*

In 2006, the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) released a document called *Background Checks in Youth Sports: Guidelines for Your Organization*. A large group of recreation professionals met in 2005 to discuss this topic since so many organizations were struggling to determine the best methods to screen potential volunteers. The findings presented in the original document represented a consensus of commonly agreed upon guidelines for that time.

Since then, many changes have occurred that required NAYS to re-examine these initial guidelines. From advancements in technology and the accessibility of information to the majority of youth sports organizations viewing some sort of volunteer screening as a norm, an updated resource became necessary. NAYS gathered professional youth sports administrators and specialists from the screening field at the 2011 Youth Sports Congress to discuss and explore this topic. In addition, industry information, screening protocol, sample procedures and documents were collected and analyzed for this update.

The good news is that today the majority of youth sports organizations require volunteers to undergo some form of screening. But for many, questions still remain. Since there is not a standard screening protocol that all organizations abide by, the variations in methods used is staggering. Some organizations are struggling with the resources and knowledge necessary to conduct duly diligent background checks on their potential volunteers, whether coaches, officials or administrators. Understanding the complexities of what a thorough background check entails continues to challenge many organizations.

The vast majority of public entities (park and recreation agencies) are doing some form of background checks on their volunteers although there are major variations in the methods currently used. And, of greater concern are the bulk of volunteer, parent-run youth leagues that may or may not be screening their volunteers for a number of reasons (resources, time, knowledge, etc.).

Since there is not one standard method used by the masses, this document presents information that is applicable to any youth sports volunteer in any youth sports organization. First, we will outline the components of thorough volunteer youth sports screening. Secondly, we will outline the process to determine eligibility and the factors that can disqualify an individual from serving as a youth sports volunteer. And finally, we will provide samples of essential documents that every youth sports organization must utilize to screen volunteers.

## **The Components of a Thorough Volunteer Screening Process to Determine Eligibility:**

To ensure that the children affected by a youth sports organization receive the highest quality experience, the organization has the responsibility to select the most qualified individuals (those who understand the organization's goals and who will not create additional risks for the organization). Also and equally 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.

The following components must be included to thoroughly (or comprehensively) screen potential volunteers:

1. An **Application Form** must be completed for all volunteer positions. Required information should include name, address, references and employers. Insist that every potential volunteer complete the form, regardless of how long they have been associated or how desperate the organization is for “warm bodies.” Applications should be signed and dated by the potential volunteer. A copy of their photo identification should also be attached to their completed application form.
2. **Review Information and Check References** that was provided in the volunteer’s application form. When reviewing, look 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. If you don’t take the time to check references and confirm employment history, you are creating opportunities for individuals to become a part of your program that can potentially cause enormous harm to children. Remember, you must take every step possible to ensure that every child is fully protected, and that means being diligent and checking each prospective volunteer’s information, no matter how time consuming and tedious it may be and document everything you find out in a confidential manner.
3. **Interview** the potential volunteer. Gut level and first impressions are important! Depending on the number of volunteers that are connected to your programs, some organizations will opt for short telephone interviews while others will utilize a more formal approach.

Since the majority of the volunteers will have a child in the program, many organizations conduct the short interview during the registration process. As the parent registers their child and then agrees to potentially volunteer, this can be a time for you (or your staff) to ask some questions and make some notes on their application form.

Develop a standard interview routine to save time and allow for consistency. When you have a carefully constructed list of questions that everyone uses it allows your organization to be more effective when selecting candidates. When compiling your list of questions don’t be afraid to ask some tough ones. Also, if you run a large organization and several different staff members will be conducting interviews, by having a pre-determined list of questions it is easier for groups to compare notes on individuals.

Solicit input from staff members when formulating your list of questions so that you have a comprehensive list to choose from, or even reach out to another organization that you respect for their thorough interview process to get their input on what questions would be the most beneficial to ask.

4. Conduct a **Criminal History Background Check**. Today a thorough Criminal History Background Check should include the following components:
  - **Social Security Number (SSN) and name verification.** Obtain a copy of the potential volunteer’s social security card. In verifying the social security number, you are ensuring accuracy in searching for the proper individual.
  - **Sex Offender Registry Search (SOR).** 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. Many, if not most sex offenders comply with the reporting requirements and residency restrictions. But many don’t so we must understand that while checking the SOR is a significant component, it is only one part of the 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.
  - **A County or Statewide Criminal search when applicable.** In many places, conducting the National Criminal Database search includes state and county information. Organizations must determine what information is available in their jurisdiction to determine if the additional state and/or county checks are necessary. Please note that these searches can be costly and should ONLY be conducted if your area is not included in the National Criminal Database search. To determine if these additional searches are necessary in your area, ask the background check provider that your organization uses for a detailed explanation.
5. **Compare Results against Disqualifiers.** Once the above four components 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. It is estimated that 9.6% of all volunteers screened have a criminal record and 2.9% of would be coaches have had convictions involving sex offenses, violence or other felonies.

*Be aware that a criminal history background check is just one component of a thorough screening process since there are many people who do not have a criminal history but are inappropriate for volunteering.*

### **What DISQUALIFIES a potential volunteer?**

Before we look at the information obtained from the Criminal History Background check, the following automatic disqualifiers are important to note:

- 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

Then, we must analyze the information gathered from the Criminal History Background Check. If an applicant is found to have been convicted of any of the following offenses, 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

Organizations must determine for themselves a specific list of offenses that will eliminate a potential volunteer. Additionally, pending convictions and/or arrests for the above items should be considered as organizations determine volunteer eligibility.

Other important considerations during the process:

- Abide by your written policies. Be consistent and tell everyone about your screening initiatives to ensure that the very best volunteers are a part of your organization.
- Some organizations establish a special committee specifically to manage the background check process. This may include deciding on a background check procedure and

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 (park and recreation departments for example) defer this responsibility to their Human Resources (HR) Department.
- Document “why” for whatever decision the organization makes about a volunteer.
- Confidentiality is important! All information obtained in response to the criminal background check or disclosed in the review process should be kept confidential and not disclosed or discussed outside of the review process. Criminal history files should be maintained separate from any file accessible to the public or unauthorized personnel.
- An organization should conduct follow-up background checks at least every two years on volunteers that continue to serve.

## **Determining What’s Best for Your Organization**

Youth sports organizations are encouraged to review the current internal processes used to screen volunteers. Some organizations have very comprehensive processes already in place while others may be doing very little. A first step is to bring all youth sports providers within a community together to share current methods. Then, we encourage a standardized system be implemented to simplify the process and to encourage consistency within the community. The five-step process described above, along with the documents described below, are essential components for volunteer screening that should be used in every youth sports program. In addition, we have provided samples of each gathered from a variety of youth sports providers. These samples can be reviewed, combined and/or modified to meet the specific local needs in your community.

### **1. *Written Screening Policy***

The written policy must be readily available and communicated to ALL. It should be required that ALL volunteers go through the same screening process. A written policy shows the organization’s commitment to ensuring that only the most qualified individuals are involved in the program and 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.

### **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. Applications should be signed and dated by applicants. They should be filed and should be confidential with only the key administrators in charge of the program having access to the application information. Many organizations also require a copy of some form of identification (driver's license, passport, etc.) to accompany the application form.

To access the sample documents described above, **CLICK HERE** to log-in to NAYS website.

### **Conclusions**

There is no way to be 100 percent certain about any person working in youth sports. The more preventative measures that are taken, however, the more likely children and your organization will be protected.

Remember the following:

- Screening is a pro-active approach to ensure that the organization has the right type of volunteers in all positions.
- A comprehensive background check must be conducted on every potential volunteer.
- 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 must provide training, continuous supervision and accountability.