

SCREEN POTENTIAL MENTORS AND MENTEES

The screening process has three primary purposes:

- To screen for people who have the sensitivity, commitment and sense of responsibility to be great mentors;
- To screen out people who have the potential to harm youth or the program in any way; and
- To ensure that youth participants are eligible for and can benefit from your program.

Your program is responsible for screening prospective mentors and placing them in suitable roles. As a general rule, the more risk inherent in your program (i.e., the less supervision of the mentor/mentee meetings), the more rigorous your screening process should be. Careful screening improves the quality of your mentors and helps ensure the safety of youth involved in your program, while also managing your organization's level of risk and liability.

Suggested Components of Volunteer Screening

Volunteer screening should include the following:

- Written application;
- Fingerprint criminal background check and related checks;
- Character reference checks;
- Face-to-face interview; and
- Participation in pre-match training.

Before you begin screening volunteers, your organization should develop a written policy documenting your screening process. This policy should include a list of elements that each prospective volunteer must complete, guidelines for selecting or disqualifying volunteers and clear instructions on interpreting a criminal history check. You should also keep in mind that information gathered through the screening process should be kept confidential. Also, always document what you find during the screening process and the

decisions you make about the volunteer. This documentation verifies that your program followed your written screening policies on each prospective mentor.

Require Written Applications

The first step in the screening process is to require all prospective mentors to complete a written application, which includes the preferred grade level, age and gender of the young person with whom they wish to work and their preferences for meeting times. (Some programs match mentors only with individuals of the same gender and ethnic group. Others do not. This decision should be made in the program design phase.) The application includes a statement of the applicant's expectations, special interests (which are helpful in matching mentors with youth), a complete list of personal references and employment history. The application also includes a release statement that authorizes a background check, fully discharges the program from liability and claims and states the applicant's commitment to abide by program rules and regulations.

Conduct Reference Checks, such as, Employment Record, Character Reference, Child Abuse Registry, Driving Record and Criminal Record Checks

Criminal background checks are critical, but they are only one element of a careful screening process. A robust system of reference checks and interviews of potential volunteers, evaluation of risk and ongoing monitoring should be a part of your organization's regular procedures.

Criminal Background Check

The criminal background check system in the United States is complicated. Each state is the gatekeeper for background checks; that is, the state decides who can access background checks and for what purpose. There is no consistency from state to state on eligibility, process, cost and turnaround time. In many states, the most thorough types of background checks may not be available to mentoring organizations. Check with your state to find out what options are available.



MENTORING TOOL

See mentor applications, interview questions and reference forms in Section VI on the CD.

It can be very confusing for a mentoring program staff person to sort through the types of background checks that are available and decide what is the best. Below you will find information on factors to consider in selecting the background check your organization will use. There is no single criminal database in this country that includes every criminal record, so there is no “perfect” background check. Many organizations use a combination of two or three types of checks to get the most complete information.

- **Fingerprint-based vs. name-based.** A name-based check uses a person’s name and Social Security number to match any possible criminal records. There are several weaknesses with a name-based check:
 1. The volunteer could provide you with a false name and Social Security number. In fact, more than 1 percent of the 45 million individuals in the FBI criminal database have used more than 100 aliases and false Social Security numbers.
 2. Female volunteers may have two or more different last names if they have been married one or more times. If you check only the current name, you can miss criminal records.
 3. Criminal databases can have mistakes in the spelling of an individual’s name and other relevant information. A name-based check might miss a criminal record if the record itself contains mistakes.
 4. Because many names are similar, you can get a “false positive”—your potential volunteer seems to have a criminal record, but the record actually belongs to another person with the same name.

A fingerprint-based check is the only way to verify a person’s identity and ensure that the criminal records found are for the right person. However, in many states, fingerprint checks are not available to mentoring organizations. A reliable and thorough option for mentoring programs is SafetyNET, a fingerprint-based search of the FBI’s nationwide criminal database. More information on SafetyNET is included later in this section.

Additional background checks include:

- **County/local checks.** Background checks of a county or local jurisdiction can be obtained through the local police department. These checks include only crimes committed within that jurisdiction. Conducting a county search is better than doing no background check at all, but there are weaknesses. People in our society are very mobile; they move around a lot and may work and live, take vacations and business trips or serve in the military in different counties. In large metropolitan areas, an individual may pass through three or four counties in the course of a day’s activities. In addition, if you check the counties where your volunteer has lived over the past three to five years, you are relying on the volunteer to be truthful about past residences. Use county or local searches with great caution, because you will miss any criminal offenses committed in other jurisdictions.
- **State background checks.** These background checks are obtained through a state agency (the specific agency varies from state to state). They include only crimes committed in that state, so the limitations in a county check also apply to a state check. Also, costs and response times vary widely from state to state. Some states allow fingerprint-based checks, some allow only name-based checks, and some offer both types for different fees. Most state checks also include arrests, but a few include only convictions. A list of State Criminal History Record Repositories is available at www94311.temp.w1.com/csb/csb_crim.htm.
- **Private vendor checks.** Dozens of private vendors advertise their ability to conduct criminal background checks. The costs, response times and quality of these checks vary widely from company to company. Private background checks are generally name-based and usually find only convictions, not arrests.

Private vendors use two basic methods to conduct background checks. Some search county record repositories for the volunteer’s county of residence for the past three to five years, which has the same drawbacks as a county search. Other vendors main-

tain databases of criminal records, often searchable online. Some of these vendors advertise their background checks as national in scope, but they are actually only multistate. These vendors buy criminal data from individual states; but many states have strong privacy laws and do not sell any criminal data. Other states sell only a portion of their data (e.g., parole records but not full conviction or arrest files). This means that when you run a search through a private vendor, you are accessing complete records from a few states, partial records from many states and no records from many states.

If you are using a private vendor check, find out as much as you can about what method the vendor uses to conduct the background check and what data is accessed.

- **FBI checks.** The FBI maintains the most complete criminal database in the United States. It contains more than 200 million arrest and conviction records of more than 45 million individuals. All records are fingerprint-based. Five to seven thousand new individuals are added to the FBI database every day when persons are arrested for the first time. The database is made up of all federal crimes plus approximately 70 to 90 percent of each state's criminal databases. Low-level misdemeanors and citations are generally not present in the FBI database, so programs that use an FBI check may wish to supplement it with a driver's license check or a state background check to access these records.

To obtain an FBI check, you must go through your state background check agency. Unfortunately, many states have strict eligibility requirements for FBI checks, and mentoring organizations often don't qualify. When FBI checks are available, they may be very costly or have a lengthy turnaround time.

Mentoring organizations can access FBI checks through SafetyNET through January 31, 2006. MENTOR hopes that the SafetyNET pilot will become a permanent program beyond 2006. Through SafetyNET, any mentoring organization in the country can get an FBI check on a volunteer for \$18, with results returned in three to five business days. To learn more

about SafetyNET or to apply to join the pilot, visit Mentoring.org/SafetyNET.

Many mentoring programs conduct other types of checks to supplement their criminal background checks. The following are some examples:

1. **Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) check.**

This check provides information about an individual's license records, including license convictions, reportable accidents, license expirations, suspensions or revocations, license restorations, driving under the influence charges (DUIs) and point/insurance reduction completion. Depending on state rules and regulations, the prospective volunteer rather than the mentoring program may need to submit the check. A list of state DMVs is available on the Drunk Driving Defense Web site at www.drunkdrivingdefense.com/national/dps-offices.htm.

2. **State sex offender registries.** Most states now have sex offender registries that are available online, making it easy to search several states for an individual. Any crimes that would cause an individual to be on a sex offender registry should show up in a state or FBI criminal background check, but this is a good double check. However, sex offender registries are not reliable as the only method of doing a background check; they depend on the offender to update the registry when he or she moves, so they are usually dated. A list of state sex offender registries is available on the FBI Web site at www.fbi.gov/hq/cid/cac/states.htm.

3. **Child abuse registries.** A few states allow organizations that work with children to check an individual against the child abuse registry. These databases often include complaints of abuse that did not result in arrest or prosecution and so would not be in a criminal database. Try contacting your state's department of child welfare to see if the child abuse registry is accessible.

MENTOR strongly recommends that your program conduct criminal background checks for all volunteers. At the same time, criminal background checks are no substitute for personal reference checks and a face-to-

face interview. An interview can give you solid clues as to whether your applicant has the characteristics to make a good mentor, such as patience, flexibility, commitment and an open mind. But only by asking for and then checking with individual personal references will you get a more complete picture of the applicant.

Conduct Face-to-Face Interviews

Review and discuss the mentor position description with candidates to ensure that they understand the program's expectations. Know what questions you want to ask before the interview. Explore not only the personal



MENTORING TOOL

See screening tools, including a list of interview questions, in Section VI on the CD.

attributes you'll require, but the practical expectations as well. Will the mentor's daily routine leave adequate time for a mentoring relationship? Is the candidate close enough geographically to the meeting location so that transportation will not pose a problem? Will the candidate be comfortable with the level of supervision you intend to provide? Give the applicant the opportunity to ask questions and provide honest, forthright answers.

The Potential Child Molester

Watch out for characteristics and areas of concern that may surface in volunteer screening and carefully explore them with an eye to detecting the high-risk individual. The possession of one or two of these characteristics does not constitute a concern, but if an

INDICATORS OF THE POTENTIAL CHILD MOLESTER

- Over-identification with children: in his or her interaction with children, regresses to their level of behavior, relinquishes adult role and responsibility, or tends to become more like the child.
- Exaggerated animation around children: eyes light up and expression heightens in reference to children.
- Premium on one-on-one activities: prefers low visibility over those activities that involve a group.
- Indication of anxiety regarding adult sexuality.
- Extremely judgmental attitude toward homosexuality.
- Describes the type of child he or she wants to mentor in specific terms, emphasizing specific physical or emotional characteristics (e.g., wants child with blonde hair, age nine, very shy).
- Overly anxious to be matched immediately.
- Absence of appropriate peer relationships—confines circle of friends to significantly younger associates.
- History of being abused, neglected or sexually victimized.
- Character immaturity: shy, withdrawn, or passive.
- Police record.
- Dating history or sexual development does not follow "normal" pattern.
- Does not have meaningful relationships with other adults.
- Applicant has found his or her own mentee and tries to get the agency to "legitimize" the match.
- Premature separation from military service.
- Abuse of alcohol or other substances.
- No ambition for responsibility.
- History of moving from job to job or place to place.
- Becomes extremely angry or defensive when asked to submit to a criminal background check, even after the reasons for this are explained.

SOURCE: *THE ABCS OF MENTORING*, MENTORING PARTNERSHIP OF LONG ISLAND, 2003.

overall pattern begins to emerge, it should be discussed with a clinical supervisor (if you have one) or your program coordinator.

Screening Out Mentors¹⁰

Some people don't make good mentors. There are no hard-and-fast rules other than the obvious ones: criminal record, history of child abuse and so forth. However, you may want to also screen out those who exhibit the following characteristics:

1. Don't have enough time to commit to being consistent in their mentoring;
2. Seem to be volunteering for status or job promotion reasons;
3. Hold rigid opinions and don't seem open to new ideas;
4. Seem too concerned about what a mentee can do for them;
5. Want to be a mentor so they can work out problems from their own past; or
6. Do not have skills that match your program's needs.

How to Say No

If a potential mentor exhibits any of these traits, it is best not to accept that applicant. Remember, there is no legal right for interested volunteers to serve as mentors. You may want to offer the volunteer a different opportunity, so it's a good idea to be prepared with a list of volunteer assignments other than mentoring: fundraising, office work, public relations and so on. When you must turn down an applicant, here are some things you might say:

1. "We have no mentees who would match well with you at this time."
2. "Your skills and interests don't fit our mentoring profile, but we'd like to have you involved with the program. Might I suggest some other important volunteer opportunities?"

Interviewing Mentees

After youth are selected to participate or receive a referral from a parent or caregiver, the next step is to provide an orientation to the youth and parent/caregiver to determine if the program is appropriate to their needs. If the mission of your program meets their needs and expectations, you can then screen the youth through an intake interview.

Focus the interview on the youth's eligibility for participation. Use it to assess the youth's attitude and interest in the program and to help you make an appropriate match. You can also use the interview to gather personal information about the youth and outline the program expectations and policies to the parent/caregiver. If you determine that the youth could benefit from participation in the mentoring program, have the parent/caregiver complete and sign a consent form and arrange for the mentee to receive training.

Hold Orientations

MENTORING TOOL

See orientation and training agendas and handouts in Section VI on the CD.

Conducting orientations as part of the screening process can also serve as a mechanism to weed out prospective participants who do not have the time or the motivation to participate in the program. Detailed information on mentor and mentee orientation sessions is included in the following section.

ORIENT AND TRAIN MENTORS, MENTEES AND PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

Establish a schedule that includes orientation and training for mentors and mentees. In this section, we will focus on key components for orienting, training and supporting mentors and mentees.

Mentor Orientation

By providing prospective mentors with a pre-match orientation, you allow them to make a more informed decision about whether to participate in your program. It also gives them the chance to meet other prospective