

# Take the First Step...

understanding volunteer screening



**Ontario Screening Initiative**





## **Ontario Screening Initiative**

The **Ontario Screening Initiative** (OSI) is a three-year project carried out by a consortium of five provincial-level voluntary sector organizations: the Ontario Rural Council, Sport Alliance of Ontario, Parks & Recreation Ontario, Ontario Community Support Association, and a coalition of faith groups (Anglican, Catholic, United, and Unitarian). Volunteer Canada, through its Ontario Volunteer Centre Network, and in partnership with the OSI consortium, is leading the Ontario Screening Initiative. The project is designed to guide and support grass-roots organizations within the networks of the consortium memberships to adopt screening practices and policies.

Funding for the OSI is being provided by the Government of Ontario through the Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation.

**Aussi disponible en français**

# What is Screening?

Screening is an ongoing 10-step process designed to identify any person (volunteer or staff) who may harm children or vulnerable adults.

Volunteer screening serves two main purposes:

- **to create and maintain a safe environment;**
- **to ensure an appropriate match between volunteer and task.**

Though a relatively new concept, volunteer screening is being adopted by a growing number of organizations. The process includes assessing risk, writing position descriptions, discerning the suitability of an individual for a given task, providing training and, when necessary, modifying the setting and arrangement of the task.



# Why Screen?

Any organization that provides programs to vulnerable people has a moral, legal, and spiritual obligation to appropriately screen those who work for them, including volunteers. Screening is not only the right thing to do, it is legally required under the principle of “Duty of Care.”

**“We rely on the complete screening process to selectively recruit volunteers. It’s the combination of steps that makes the process successful.”**

*Grace Belzner, Scouts Canada, Assistant National Commissioner, Volunteer Services*

# Questions and Answers

## Frequently asked questions about the screening of volunteers

### Q Does screening suggest that volunteers can't be trusted?

- A No. Like most forms of insurance, screening is intended to prevent the problem that likely won't occur. However, screening addresses the reality that it is possible a person could seek out parks and recreation or sport organizations with the intent of stealing money, property, or harming participants and/or staff.

### Q Should all volunteers be screened?

- A Ideally, all applicants should go through a screening process. However, the most important positions to screen are those where a person works with children or vulnerable adults. Each position has a different level of risk. Determining the risk in a particular position is an important part of the screening process.

### Q I'm on the board of directors of an organization that provides programs to vulnerable participants. Do I have to be concerned about screening?

- A Absolutely! The board of directors is ultimately responsible (and as a result, potentially liable) for the services and programs run by the organization. It is in your best interests, as well as those that the organization serves, to establish ground rules that guide staff in designing appropriate screening measures.

### Q On what basis can an organization refuse an applicant for a volunteer position?

- A An applicant can be refused if his or her interests and experience do not meet the requirements of the position or if their background makes them unsuitable to work with vulnerable people.



# Know the Facts

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**“In small areas like ours, people get used to trusting other people. And 99.9% percent of the time, that’s OK. But screening is essential to identify that other .01%.”**

*Paul Mainprize,  
member, volunteer interest  
area, Parks & Recreation  
Ontario*

- Three out of four Canadians volunteer, either formally or informally, doing things like – keeping team statistics or offering to provide snacks for a day camp – or by providing some other assistance – such as cleaning up community parks or offering to find league sponsors.
  - 32% of the population of Ontario engage in voluntary activity.
  - The volunteer rate for youth has almost doubled over the last 10 years, from 18% to 33%.
  - 29% of Canadian youth who volunteer coach or teach others.
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- Recreation and social clubs accounted for 17% of the total volunteer hours contributed while sport organizations accounted for 11%
  - More than two out of five volunteers say they became involved because someone from a voluntary organization asked them.
  - For 78% of victims of sexual offences, the accused was a friend, acquaintance or family member. Juristat, 1997

*From Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating.*

# The Safe Steps

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The Safe Steps Volunteer Screening Program provides an easy-to-use method for organizations to ensure that the people they serve are safe.

## 1 Determine the risk

Organizations can control the risk in their programs. Examining the potential for danger in programs and services may lead to preventing or eliminating the risk altogether.

## 2 Write a clear position description

Careful position descriptions send the message that an organization is serious about screening. Responsibilities and expectations can be clearly set out, right down to the position's dos and don'ts. A clear position description indicates the screening requirements. When a volunteer changes positions, the screening procedures may change as well.

## 3 Establish a formal recruitment process

Whether an agency posts notices for volunteer positions or sends home flyers, they must indicate that screening is part of the application process.

## 4 Use an application form

The application form provides needed contact information. If the volunteer position requires other screening measures (medical exam, driver's record, police records check), the application form will ask for permission to do so.

## 5 Conduct interviews

Interviews help ensure that candidates meet the position requirements and fit in with the organization.

## 6 Follow up on references

By identifying the level of trust required in the position and asking specific questions, the applicant's suitability may be easier to determine. People often do not expect that their references will be checked. Do not assume that applicants only supply the names of people who will speak well of them.

## 7 Request a Police Records Check

A Police Records Check (PRC) is just one step in a 10-step screening process. PRCs signal – in a very public way – that the organization is concerned about the safety of its clients.

## 8 Conduct orientation and training sessions

Screening does not end once the volunteer is in place. Orientation and training sessions offer an opportunity to observe volunteers in a different setting. These sessions also allow organizations to inform volunteers about policies

and procedures. Probation periods give both the organization and the volunteer time to learn more about each other.

## 9 Supervise and evaluate

The identified level of risk associated with a volunteer position will determine the necessary degree of supervision and evaluation. If the risk is great, it follows that the volunteer will be under close supervision. Frequent feedback in the first year is particularly important. Evaluations must be based on position descriptions.

## 10 Follow up with program participants

Regular contact with participants and family members can act as an effective deterrent to someone who might otherwise do harm. Volunteers should be made aware of any follow-up activities that may occur. These could include spot checks for volunteers in high-risk positions.



# Myths and Realities

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By knowing your obligations, being aware of the dangers, and seeking appropriate solutions you take the first step in protecting your organization, your volunteers, and your participants. The following are just some of the myths – and realities – that you must be aware of to make the volunteering experience safe and rewarding for everyone in your organization.

**Myth: If a volunteer harms a participant, the organization can't be held liable, because volunteers are not employees.**

**Reality:** Increasingly, the courts are holding non-profit and charitable organizations accountable for their volunteers' actions. If your organization has created or permitted a situation that results in harm, you can be held liable.

**Myth: It can't happen here.**

**Reality:** Perhaps the most dangerous myth of all. While very few people betray their trust, it does happen. Physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, theft of property, harassment, property damage, extortion, and assault can and do happen in all types of organizations.

**Myth: A police records check will identify any person with the potential to harm a child or vulnerable adult in your programs.**

**Reality:** The information you can receive through a police records check is limited. The process will identify only those people who have been convicted of a crime. The fact is, many people who abuse others have never been caught, charged, or convicted. Positions that require a volunteer to work in close contact with children or vulnerable adults should undergo more than just a police records check.



# Where Police Checks Fit In

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**“The Club had a responsibility to make every reasonable effort to ensure the safety of its youth membership – a screening program for its Rep Team volunteers is one such way in which we have addressed this concern.”**

*Joint Committee on Volunteer Screening, Burlington Youth Soccer Club*

While a police records check can be an essential screening step for volunteers who work with children or vulnerable adults, it is only one step in a complete screening process. By itself, a police check is not enough to determine if a volunteer is appropriate for certain duties. That’s because the information gathered through police checks is limited to what is known about an individual. In fact, many abuses are committed by people who have never been charged.

In addition, a recent conviction or charge may not yet appear on a person’s police record. And individuals who are eventually

pardoned may have their record “erased.” The records of young people, meanwhile, may not be available under the *Young Offenders Act*.

For those reasons, police records checks may be the most sensitive and misunderstood of the steps in a successful volunteer screening process. Too often, organizations assume a police records check is enough to determine a volunteer’s suitability.

Even a sex offender registry cannot ensure that all offenders are identified. Most incidents of abuse against children and vulnerable adults are perpetrated by people who have never been convicted of a crime. As a result, their names will not appear in a registry of sex offenders. Also, surveys show that 90% of sexual assaults are never reported to the police.

A sex offender registry could cause confusion in that some people believe a registry has the capacity to identify all people capable of committing such an offence.

# Act Now!

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Though volunteer screening is gaining wider acceptance, many organizations have yet to introduce such a process. Through its efforts, the **Ontario Screening Initiative** is working to increase participation in, and acceptance of, effective screening programs. To protect your volunteers and participants use the points below to begin the process of introducing or improving a screening program in your organization:

- find support from other board members, staff, parents, and volunteers in implementing or improving the volunteer screening process in your organization;
- provide a copy of this booklet to members of your board/executive;
- consult similar organizations about their screening policies and procedures;
- complete the Screening Standards worksheet available in the Safe Steps workbook (available from Volunteer Canada);
- review existing screening policies and procedures in your organization and identify the gaps.

**“We’ve had screening for volunteers and staff for three years and we’ve never had a single complaint. In fact, people tell us they believe in it.”**

*Glen Harkness, director,  
Hamilton East Boys and  
Girls Club*

Don't be overwhelmed. Start by accomplishing one of the 10 Safe Steps, then build on your success.

*Contact your local volunteer centre for training and consultation help on screening in your area.*

Volunteer Canada is the national voice for volunteerism in Canada. We work closely with four provincial centres (including the federation of 109 volunteer centres in Québec), and 86 local volunteer centres throughout the country. Our shared mandate is to promote excellence in volunteerism in Canada. Our membership includes national charities, associations, non-governmental organizations, corporations, and individuals.

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