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How to Conduct Background Checks for Youth Sports Volunteers

By: Greg Bach - September 1, 2009

Following these nine steps can help protect youth sports participants — and your programs.

With time and resources scarce, it's no surprise that many volunteer youth sports organizations struggle to conduct proper background checks. When children's safety and well-being are at stake, guidelines need to be in place that help program administrators ensure the safety of their participants.

Based on reports from experts with experience in youth sports, background screening and law enforcement, as well as input from a group of recreation administrators, the National Alliance for Youth Sports has developed a nine-step process to help youth sports organizations meet the challenge of implementing background checks:

- 1 Have a written screening policy.** It should be included in any organization's policies and procedures, and communicated to everyone.
- 2 Provide job descriptions for every position.** Doing so creates boundaries for volunteers, who should be required to read, sign and date the written descriptions.
- 3 Obtain completed application forms for all positions.** Required information should include name, address, references and employers. Insist that every potential volunteer complete a form, regardless of how desperate the organization is for "warm bodies."
- 4 Obtain a signed and dated consent form.** This informs volunteers of investigations into their backgrounds and protects organizations against potential invasion-of-privacy claims.
- 5 Review references and employer information.** This helps determine whether the volunteer possesses the basic necessities for a given position.
- 6 Interview the applicant.** Develop a standard routine to save time and allow for consistency. Don't be afraid to ask tough questions.

7 Conduct a criminal background check. If resources are scarce, ask local lawmakers and law-enforcement officials for help. Also consider fundraising to help pay for background checks. Be aware that a criminal-history background check is just one component of a thorough screening process; many people who do not have a criminal history may still be unfit for volunteering.

8 Provide training for all volunteers and hold them accountable. Make volunteers pledge to uphold a code of ethics, and hold them accountable for all actions for as long as they are a part of the organization.

9 Review procedures and provide continuous oversight of volunteers. Evaluate screening results and determine what makes a particular volunteer undesirable. Document decisions, and periodically evaluate a volunteer's performance.