

# Screening and the Volunteer Recruitment Process

Organisations should recruit volunteers in a fair and non-discriminatory way. Screening volunteers is an essential part of the recruitment process. Undertaking selection and screening enables organisations to establish the suitability of potential volunteers for the roles and tasks they are expected to carry out.

As well as assessing the general suitability of an applicant for a volunteer position, screening assists with risk management. Effective risk management helps protect organisations against financial loss, the risk of criminal or civil legal action and/or damage to their reputation.

The great majority of volunteers perform their roles without incident and with commitment to the wellbeing of client/consumer groups. However, volunteer roles that require a degree of trust call for vigilant screening. Organisations that place volunteers in work with vulnerable populations such as children, people with disabilities and elderly people, should employ especially rigorous screening procedures to minimise the risk of harm to these people.

## What is Risk Management?

Risk management is a process of devising practical strategies for identifying, avoiding and minimising risks that exist in the work of an organisation. These processes give managers, employees and volunteers the confidence to pursue their mission without the fear of legal action or harm.

Risk management begins with identifying all the problems that could arise because of the organisation conducting its activities. When considered in the context of recruiting volunteers, it begins with a consideration of the opportunities for volunteers in your organisation and how these opportunities might pose a risk to your organisation.

A 'best practice' approach to risk management requires that identified risks are mitigated or eliminated when planning volunteering activities. It also requires the implementation of recruitment processes that test the suitability of applicants to perform the volunteer role and provide a solid basis for screening out applicants who pose a risk.

### Example

*Organisation X places volunteers in work involving people with disabilities. The risk to these clients is reduced because the organisation implements a policy that volunteers must work in groups of two or more, and never alone. By planning activities in this way, the risk of a volunteer harming a client is reduced.*

*Organisation X further reduces this risk by implementing a comprehensive screening process requiring applicants to provide references and undergo face to face interviews and appropriate background checks.*

The above example includes measures that create opportunities to get to know prospective volunteers and assess their suitability for volunteering roles.

## Recruitment

Where required, it should be clear to prospective volunteers from the outset that they will be required to undergo a screening process and that a volunteer role will not be automatically offered. The complexity of a screening process is usually dictated by the tasks involved in a volunteering role. For example, volunteer work that has a face-to-face component with vulnerable people. The screening process should begin with consideration of what duties volunteers will be asked to perform, and the level of trust is required to perform them satisfactorily. When conducted openly, screening procedures send a positive message to potential volunteers – that the organisation is professional in its approach to volunteer management. The screening process may also act as a deterrent to some applicants who pose a risk to organisations.

Depending on the level of risk associated with any given role, organisations might consider implementing some or all of the following steps:

- Decide on the steps of the recruitment process, including screening measures.
- Determine in advance what the screening process might reveal that would make an applicant unsuitable for a role.
- Make it clear to applicants that they will be subject to a screening process.
- Have a process in place to notify unsuitable applicants.

## Screening Measures

### Background Checks

Each State and Territory has different requirements for persons working with children or vulnerable people. If a volunteering role requires working with vulnerable people, volunteers will be required to hold the appropriate clearance. These include:

- Working with Children Check for Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia and Southern Australia
- Working with Children Clearance for the Northern Territory
- Blue Card for Queensland
- Working with Vulnerable People Check for the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania.

### Police Checks

Police Checks are a useful tool, but organisations should be wary about using them as a sole measure of screening applicants because of the limitations of the information they provide. Police Checks can be used to provide further information on the suitability of volunteers applying for certain roles, such as volunteer drivers or board members, where a conviction may be relevant. Police Checks should not be used to discriminate against volunteers with convictions that will not affect their suitability for the work they are applying to undertake. Your organisation should consider in advance what, if any, convictions would preclude an applicant from being suitable for a volunteering role.

### Character References

Character references can help determine the suitability of a person for the volunteer role and can help organisations to get a more personalised understanding of the capacity and capability of a prospective volunteer. Consider putting together some standard questions for reference checks that provide you with

sufficient information to determine suitability. Your organisation may choose to accept written or verbal references, or both. Keep in mind that reference checks are subjective and may not be sufficient from a risk management perspective to completely assess suitability of a volunteer for roles with high levels of trust, or roles working directly with vulnerable people with little or no supervision.

### Interviews

Conducting in person interviews can assist you to assess whether you think an applicant will be suitable for a role, and whether they will be a good cultural fit. It is integral that your organisation approaches interviews in a consistent and non-discriminatory way. Depending on the role, it may be advantageous to have two or more persons from your organisation present for an interview. This can increase objectivity and enables further discussion if there are any hesitation about an applicant's suitability. Prepare interview questions in advance and ensure questions are asked consistently of all applicants to provide a measure of comparison. Beware of your own unconscious biases when conducting interviews of prospective volunteers.

Keeping in touch with prospective volunteers is invaluable in assessing ongoing suitability for volunteering roles. This might be achieved through peer support, supervision, ongoing training, or simply through working alongside volunteers. It is important to consider introducing additional screening mechanisms if a volunteer moves into a position where a greater level of trust is required than for the role, they were originally engaged in.

### Record Keeping

It is important to keep up-to-date records on the screening checks you have conducted for each of your volunteers. Working with children, vulnerable people and blue card checks all expire, as do police checks. Importantly, maintaining records helps to ensure that checks are updated as required so that the organisation remains compliant with the legal requirements of your region.