

Finding the Right Fit: Tips for Screening Potential Volunteers in a Law Enforcement Environment

By Lisa Knapton

Volunteering for law enforcement departments is a unique opportunity within a specialized field. Volunteers in a police department may have access to confidential, sensitive information and may represent the department to the public. Some volunteers have access to secure areas and may even utilize police equipment. Because of the increased risks and responsibilities associated with law enforcement volunteering, it is incumbent upon police departments to ensure that volunteers meet the same standards of conduct required of paid staff. Accordingly, the screening and selection process for police volunteers is generally more stringent than what most other types of volunteer positions require.

A thorough police volunteer application and background check process should be developed and implemented. Elements of the application should solicit information to include but not be limited to the volunteer's contact information, including all names or aliases the applicant has used, date of birth, place of birth, educational history, the past ten years of employment history, prior volunteer experience, military service and discharge status and any specialized skills that would assist with the assignment of volunteer duties. The application should notify applicants that a thorough background check and screening will be conducted, including criminal history investigation, reference checks, credit history review (depending on the volunteer's duties) and possibly Washington State Patrol ACCESS screening if the position involves computer use. It is recommended that applicants be required to provide a minimum of three references. It is also recommended that the references be responsible adults who are not relatives and have known the volunteer for a minimum of five years.

After an initial screening of applications, the volunteer applicant should be asked to answer questions regarding their criminal history to include all arrests and convictions. The applicant should be given the opportunity to provide an explanation surrounding any arrests and/or convictions. Applicants should also be asked to divulge alcohol and/or any illegal drug use or gambling issues.

It is recommended that a thorough background check be performed and the results analyzed, ruling out applicants unsuitable for work in a law enforcement environment. Further, that staff members responsible for analyzing the results of the background checks have a pre-developed list of automatic disqualifiers which include but not be limited to felony conviction, recent misdemeanor conviction, dishonorable military discharge or falsification of application materials. Discretionary disqualifiers may include but not be limited to excessive traffic violations, alcohol

abuse, arrests without conviction or a poor credit rating (if the volunteer position involves handing money, evidence or other valuables).

Volunteer applicants who have cleared the application and background check process should undergo an in-person interview. This is a good opportunity to assess the applicant's reasons for wanting to volunteer, commitment to the program, level of maturity and personal stability, their willingness to learn and accept supervision, and to discuss their availability. A list of questions should be prepared well in advance of the interview process. Interviewers should make sure the interview time is uninterrupted. It is also important for interviewers to be active listeners. If an answer sounds odd, pursue it. Never assume anything.

There are many benefits to police departments as well as the community by use of volunteers but it is important to understand that without proper screening procedures the benefits may quickly materialize into risks. Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS), a national organization, has many resources available for the development and implementation of volunteer programs in law enforcement. For further information see: Volunteers in Police Service.com The U.S. Department of Justice also has good resource material that can be found at: US Department of Justice VIPS Resource Guide For further information about implementing a volunteer program or analyzing your existing program, contact your Risk Management Representative at WCIA.