

# The importance of reference checks

By Carlene Brown

Why is it important to conduct reference checks? Failure to properly screen prospective employees and/or volunteers may trigger liability in areas including negligent hiring.

Many members provide Park and Recreation programs which can involve children under the age of 18, developmentally disabled persons, or vulnerable adults. In the *Williams vs. Puyallup* case, a reference check would have been key to finding out that the applicant who had been a former football and wrestling coach at a school district in Oregon State had been terminated for child pornography and later convicted of child molestation.

We typically hear conflicting opinions as to the value of reference checks in this day and age. For many, reference checking is just part of the process, and they do not place much value on the information learned about candidates. In some cases, members may be thinking the references provided may be biased or fraudulent. However, it is an incredibly vital part of any recruitment process and should never slip through the cracks. Although reference letters in some instances may be biased and therefore useless, verbal references are essential and often more candid. Whenever we want an honest opinion about a potential candidate, a phone call is what is needed.

A phone call has two advantages. First, it is interactive since we can ask specific questions and follow up with answers to questions we are interested in. Second, people often times feel they can speak more freely on the phone because there is no paper trail.

Reference checks can reveal potential candidates who may not be the best at interviewing and filter out candidates who appear extraordinary on paper.

Similarly, a resume can only tell so much. The resume may look like your candidate is able to do the job but has never performed this job in the past. This is where references can provide a wealth of information. In other words, you don't want to find out the hard way about a candidate's poor performance.

In addition, the only thing a reference check costs is a little time and effort, and it can save you from huge ramifications further down the line. WCIA strongly recommends proper screening of all prospective applicants, including volunteers. Often during the call, a reference will provide additional information about the candidate that may not have been foreseen.

If the volunteer is a minor, obtain written consent from a parent or legal guardian before initiating any screening. If the minor has no job experience, rely on academic counselors, teachers, coaches, or volunteer coordinators. In this case, the focus should be on assessing character, reliability, and maturity rather than professional history.

Concerning minors, below are some questions to consider asking:

- What is their relationship to the minor?
- How does the minor handle responsibility, feedback, and punctuality?
- What are the minor's key strengths?
- Would you trust this person around vulnerable populations (if applicable)?

It is good practice to inform the applicant or volunteer that you are proceeding to check references. One way to do this is through a written waiver given as a part of your application process along with notice to all candidates that you reserve the right to check any and all job-related references. A waiver may also be useful in persuading a reluctant reference to provide requested information. It is also important to keep detailed records of the references contacted and their responses.

The WCIA Liability Resource Manual has a sample of a reference release: [PER15.03-Sample-Reference-Release](#). Although reference checking can seem like a tedious and cumbersome process, a well-done reference check is well worth the time investment and is an essential step in hiring the best candidate or volunteer for the position.

For further information or questions, please contact your WCIA Risk Management Representative.