

White paper

The Importance of Background Screening for Not-for-Profits

Each day, close to 150 individuals with criminal records apply for positions with not-for-profit organisations.

May 2013

Are our most vulnerable populations at risk?

Vulnerable populations can include the poor, the elderly and the disabled, as well as those isolated by culture, language or geography. They also include at-risk children and family members separated from one another in a disaster; they are the homebound, tourists and even animals.

These vulnerable populations increasingly rely on the 41,000 not-for-profit organisations in Australia¹ to deliver the programs and services that increase their quality of life and in some cases are essential to their survival.

Fundamental to Australia's not-for-profits' ability to deliver these services to vulnerable individuals are volunteers. According to the Centre for Volunteering, in 2010, 6.1 million people or 36 per cent of the Australian population had undertaken some form of voluntary work in the previous 12 months. This is an increase of 34 per cent from 2006.² It is estimated that in NSW over 1.3 million volunteers are working with children.³

With the large number of volunteers providing services directly to our most vulnerable populations, the risks to them and the not-for-profits for whom they deliver services remains high.

How real is the risk?

In a report prepared by Volunteering Australia, 27 per cent of organisations surveyed indicated that dealing with background checks had the single greatest direct impact on volunteering in their organisation in the last 12 months.⁴ Some of these impacts included:

- Problems stemming from lengthy processing times;
- Costs of background checks;
- Lack of transferability in checks;
- Lack of access to checks.

In 2010 the Auditor-General, Peter Achterstraat, found flaws in the volunteer screening system for not-for-profits. This meant that people who may pose a risk to children may not be identified. He found that:

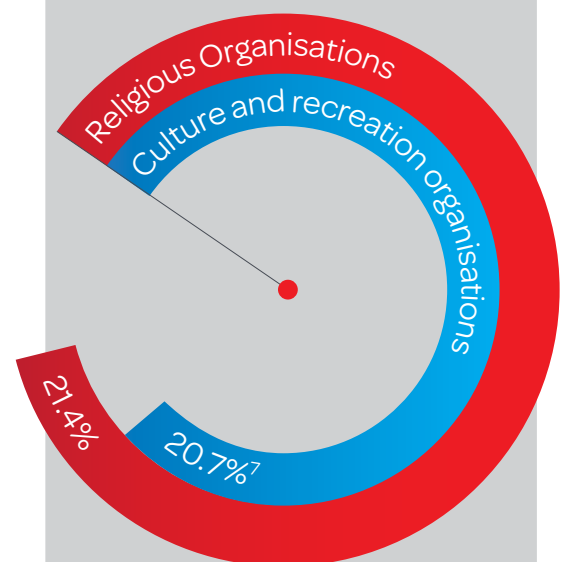
- On average, seven "significant-risk" applicants were employed each year⁵;
- Employers made the final decision whether to hire someone after a background check had been performed e.g. in 2008-2009, 14 people posing significant risk were employed⁶.

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Where do people volunteer?

Top organisations for Australian volunteers:



Current events

Background screening has become accepted as a best practice for not-for-profits across the country. However, just as many not-for-profits continue to rely on less comprehensive methods for selecting their volunteers or staff. As a result, many continue to put the clients they serve, the assets of their organisations and the overall reputation of the not-for-profit itself at risk.

Consider these two news stories

- Children's cancer charity, CanTeen, had \$302,099 stolen by an employee over a 3 year period via 244 electronic transfers. Despite having no qualifications, Neil Mitchell, was hired as National Accountant and siphoned off money which he used for overseas trips for his family, flash cars and gambling. Mitchell has been sentenced to nine years in prison, with a minimum of five before he is eligible for parole.¹⁰
- Ian Clive, a Lifeline employee has been convicted of stealing \$5,000 from the charity. Although he began working for the organisation as part of his community service for a previous scam, Lifeline hired him as a full-time employee. Clive was ordered to work for Lifeline after he was found guilty of embezzling almost \$140,000 from Queensland Health, his previous employer. He pleaded guilty to three counts of entering a premises with intent to commit an indictable offence and was sentenced to 2 years and nine months in jail, but was released on immediate parole.¹¹

Bridger Insight XG is an innovative background screening service offering attractive rates for not-for-profit organisations and churches in Australia.

For more information on our not-for-profit services to help mitigate risk, contact Customer Relations on 1800 772 772

Case Study: ChildFund Australia

Bridger is making life easier for ChildFund Australia by retaining the full audit history of the checks performed by all team members. The organisation has customised the system in line with its individual needs by setting-up users with different levels of authority. Bridger has also eliminated the need to print and file a report every time a background check is conducted.

ChildFund Australia's CEO Nigel Spence said: "The prevention of Australian funds going to proscribed organisations is a major issue for the Government and the public. By using Bridger, we can demonstrate that organisations and individuals who receive donor funds overseas are not on the list of persons or organisations listed as a proscribed organisation by the UN and the Australian government."

What steps can a not-for-profit take to protect the people it serves?

The Australian Bureau of statistics reveals that at 30 June 2012 there were 29,383 prisoners (sentenced and unsentenced) in Australian prisons, an increase of 1 per cent from 30 June 2011. This represented a national imprisonment rate of 168 prisoners per 100,000 adult populations.⁸ This sobering trend further underscores the necessity of thoroughly screening all applicants for employment and volunteer positions with our nation's not-for-profits.

Not-for-profits must be diligent when hiring and recruiting their paid and volunteer staff and conduct comprehensive background screenings. A key component of these screenings is a nationwide background check.

Nationwide background checks are critical because many individuals were convicted of crimes in states, territories and even countries that are different from their current place of residence.

Conclusions

While the majority of individuals who seek volunteer or employment positions with not-for-profits do so out of a desire to serve, statistics and current events presented in this briefing are intended to draw attention to a growing problem facing not-for-profits: how to balance the needs of their organisation while remaining vigilant about the risks some individuals pose to the safety of the clients they serve.

While employing a convicted criminal as a staff member or allowing him or her to volunteer does not mean the organisation is necessarily at risk, not-for-profits should develop sound policies for interpretation of criminal history results and remain aware of the recidivism rates for crimes, particularly for violent or sex-related crimes.

Examples to be aware of include:

- Sexual offenders are four times more likely than other types of offenders to be arrested for another related crime after their release from prison.¹²
- Individuals with poor driving records or a history of DUI convictions may be strong volunteers, but roles where driving is required may create unnecessary risks for a not-for-profit.

By remaining aware of the risks that individuals can bring to their organisations and developing simple but thorough background screening programs, not-for-profits can protect themselves and continue to provide the critical services the most vulnerable members of our society rely upon.

Summary of federal offences in Australia

In 2010-11 there were 42,037 federal offences finalised.⁹

Top offences:

Fraud and deception



Offences against justice procedures



Abduction and harassment



Sources

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- 12 The Bureau of Justice Statistics, a component of the Office of Justice Programs in the U.S. Department of Justice. "Criminal Offender Statistics." <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/>, last updated November 2003

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