



## Background Screening Trends for Churches

Over the past couple of years, we have seen an increase in the types of services being sought by churches, including screening of all volunteers who drive motor vehicles for church purposes; protective orders; verification of address history, and social security verification.

Let's look at the uses of motor vehicle record checks. In the past, churches might have only conducted this type of screening on volunteers who would be driving vehicles owned by the church. However, research shows that more than 75% of persons with suspended driver's licenses continue to drive in spite of the suspension. If a volunteer, driving his or her own vehicle, and transporting church members (such as children or youth to an offsite event), is driving without a valid license and someone is injured, then the injured parties would quite probably look to the church for payment of damages.

Protective Orders are entered by courts usually in matters involving domestic violence and/or custody disputes. Churches can benefit from utilizing Protective Orders screening for prospective volunteers and employees in several ways. For example, if a prospective volunteer is found to have a current Protective Order in place against him, or her, it can show a history of, or a propensity for, violent behavior. Finding a Protective Order in place against a prospective volunteer or employee may, or may not, preclude selection of that individual. However, at the very least, it will indicate the need for an in depth conversation with the prospective volunteer or employee before making a placement decision.

Verification of address history and social security information have become routine screening tools. They can effectively be used to assure that the applicant, prospective volunteer or employee has provided truthful information to the church. Just by asking for address history information from each applicant, we may discourage some potentially unsuitable candidates from submitting the application! Screening of address history can uncover discrepancies that indicate the need for further investigation.

In times past, many of us were very reluctant to reveal our social security information. Today, with the explosion of information available in cyber space, each individual needs to regularly monitor the information that is available about him or her. It is actually to our benefit to provide accurate information on the church application. When a screen is conducted, we may discover there is inaccurate information about us that we were unaware of! Individuals should not rely on the church's screening practices to discover false information, or inaccuracies; but, if the volunteer screening process uncovers such items, the individual will benefit from the opportunity to correct the problem.

A large part of the reluctance to provide social security identification information has been related to the idea that by providing such identification information the individual's financial situation will suddenly be revealed. On the contrary, federal legislation, including the Fair Credit Reporting Act, limits the permissible scope of background screens into a prospective employee or applicant's financial history. Currently, churches generally cannot have access to the applicant's financial history unless that information is directly related to the position that the applicant is being considered for.

In summary, churches are prudent to engage in systematic background screening practices when selecting volunteers as well as employees for their ministries. For assistance with developing a reasonable screening and selection system, contact Rev. Joy T. Melton.

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