

# Take the First Step...

understanding volunteer screening



Ontario Screening Initiative





## **Ontario Screening Initiative**

The **Ontario Screening Initiative** (OSI) is a three-year project carried out by a consortium of five provincial-level voluntary sector organizations: the Ontario Rural Council, Sport Alliance of Ontario, Parks & Recreation Ontario, Ontario Community Support Association, and a coalition of faith groups (Anglican, Catholic, United, and Unitarian). Volunteer Canada, through its Ontario Volunteer Centre Network, and in partnership with the OSI consortium, is leading the Ontario Screening Initiative. The project is designed to guide and support grass-roots organizations within the networks of the consortium memberships to adopt screening practices and policies.

Funding for the OSI is being provided by the Government of Ontario through the Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation.

**Aussi disponible en français**

# What is Screening?

Screening is an ongoing 10-step process designed to identify any person (volunteer or staff) who may harm children or vulnerable adults.

Volunteer screening serves two main purposes:

- **to create and maintain a safe environment;**
- **to ensure an appropriate match between volunteer and task.**

Though a relatively new concept, volunteer screening is being adopted by a growing number of faith communities. The process includes assessing risk, writing position descriptions, discerning the suitability of an individual for a given task, providing training and, when necessary, modifying the setting and arrangement of the task.



# Why Screen?

Any organization that provides programs to vulnerable people has a moral, legal, and spiritual obligation to appropriately screen those who work for them, including volunteers. Screening is not only the right thing to do, it is legally required under the principle of “Duty of Care.”

**“I welcome this initiative, as we all have the moral, legal, ethical, and spiritual obligation to care for and protect each other.”**

*Rev. Mr. Charles Johnston,  
Director of Diaconate  
Training, Diocese of  
Thunder Bay*

# Questions and Answers



## Frequently asked questions about the screening of volunteers

### **Q Does screening suggest that volunteers can't be trusted?**

A No. Like most prudent behaviour, screening is intended to prevent the problem that may or may not occur. However, screening addresses the reality that it is possible a person could seek out faith communities with the intent of stealing money, property, or harming participants and/or staff.

### **Q Should all volunteers be screened?**

A Ideally, all applicants should go through a screening process. However, the most important positions to screen are those where a person works with children or vulnerable adults. Each position has a different level of risk. Determining the risk in a particular position is an important part of the screening process.

### **Q I'm very involved in committees in my faith community. Do I have to be concerned about screening?**

A Absolutely! Depending on the structure of your faith community, some committees or councils are ultimately responsible (and as a result, potentially liable) for the services and programs offered by your community. Even if you are not legally responsible you are morally and spiritually bound to protect others.

### **Q On what basis can an applicant be refused for a volunteer ministry?**

A An applicant can be refused if his or her interests and experience do not meet the requirements of the ministry or if their background makes them unsuitable to work with vulnerable people. You can suggest another ministry more suitable to a person's background and talents. Be creative and think of ways for the person's gifts to be offered.

# Know the Facts

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**“As a volunteer in my parish, I understand that screening is not about me – it’s about the ministry I’m involved in and the level of risk associated with that ministry. Screening is long overdue in all our churches and I’m very glad it’s arrived.”**

*Roseanne Lyons, Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie*

- Three out of four Canadians volunteer, either formally or informally, doing things like – running the religious studies class or offering to chaperone at a retreat – or by providing some other assistance – such as cutting the grass at the church or contributing to the annual bake sale.
  - 32% of the population of Ontario engage in volunteer activity.
  - People with strong religious ties volunteer at rates higher than the rest of the population.
  - Those who attended religious services at least once a week volunteered at a rate of 46%.
- Religious organizations accounted for 18% of the total volunteer hours contributed.
  - More than two out of five volunteers say they became involved because someone from a voluntary organization asked them.
  - For 78% of victims of sexual offences, the accused was a friend, acquaintance or family member. Juristat, 1997.

*From Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating.*

# The Safe Steps

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The Safe Steps Volunteer Screening Program provides an easy-to-use method for organizations to ensure that the people they serve are safe.

## 1 Determine the risk

Organizations can control the risk in their programs. Examining the potential for danger in programs and services may lead to preventing or eliminating the risk altogether.

## 2 Write a clear position description

Careful position descriptions send the message that an organization is serious about screening. Responsibilities and expectations can be clearly set out, right down to the position's dos and don'ts. A clear position description indicates the screening requirements. When a volunteer changes positions, the screening procedures may change as well.

## 3 Establish a formal recruitment process

Whether an agency posts notices for volunteer positions or sends home flyers, they must indicate that screening is part of the application process.

## 4 Use an application form

The application form provides needed contact information. If the volunteer position requires other screening measures (medical exam, driver's record, police records check), the application form will ask for permission to do so.

## 5 Conduct interviews

Interviews help ensure that candidates meet the position requirements and fit in with the organization.

## 6 Follow up on references

By identifying the level of trust required in the position and asking specific questions, the applicant's suitability may be easier to determine. People often do not expect that their references will be checked. Do not assume that applicants only supply the names of people who will speak well of them.

## 7 Request a Police Records Check

A Police Records Check (PRC) is just one step in a 10-step screening process. PRCs signal – in a very public way – that the organization is concerned about the safety of its clients.

## 8 Conduct orientation and training sessions

Screening does not end once the volunteer is in place. Orientation and training sessions offer an opportunity to observe volunteers in a different setting. These sessions also allow organizations to inform volunteers about policies

and procedures. Probation periods give both the organization and the volunteer time to learn more about each other.

## 9 Supervise and evaluate

The identified level of risk associated with a volunteer position will determine the necessary degree of supervision and evaluation. If the risk is great, it follows that the volunteer will be under close supervision. Frequent feedback in the first year is particularly important. Evaluations must be based on position descriptions.

## 10 Follow up with program participants

Regular contact with participants and family members can act as an effective deterrent to someone who might otherwise do harm. Volunteers should be made aware of any follow-up activities that may occur. These could include spot checks for volunteers in high-risk positions.

# Myths and Realities

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By knowing your obligations, being aware of the dangers, and seeking appropriate solutions you take the first step in protecting your community, your volunteers, and your participants. The following are just some of the myths – and realities – that you must be aware of to make the volunteering experience safe and rewarding for everyone.

**Myth: If a volunteer harms a participant, the faith community can't be held liable, because volunteers are not employees.**

**Reality:** Increasingly, the courts are holding non-profit and charitable organizations accountable for their volunteers' actions. If your organization has created or permitted a situation that results in harm, you can be held liable.

**Myth: It can't happen here.**

**Reality:** Perhaps the most dangerous myth of all. While very few people betray their trust, it does happen. Physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, theft of property, harassment, property damage, extortion, and assault can and do happen in all types of organizations, including faith communities.

**Myth: Insurance will take care of any potential liability.**

**Reality:** Insurance does not cover every eventuality; there are significant exceptions in any insurance policy. Then too, if a faith community has been negligent, insurance companies may not provide coverage. Some insurance companies are now asking explicit questions on application forms for third party liability about the faith community's screening of employees and volunteers. In any case, our main obligation is to protect people, not to compensate them after they are hurt.

# Protection for your Community

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**“I think that volunteer screening has been important to our congregations. Not so much to uncover an abuser, but to act as a deterrent that could prevent many problems.”**

*Rev. Pat Webber, Unitarian  
Universalist Religious  
Education Programme  
Consultant*

The services your faith community offers benefit many people. You have designed your programs to enrich and improve your community. At the same time, you are committed to protecting both your volunteers and those they serve. You want your community to demonstrate a moral and spiritual responsibility for the well-being of others.

The sad fact is, despite your best efforts, one or more of the people you serve may eventually be harmed. In such a case, your group may be called upon to defend the safety of its procedures and practices.

Simply put, as a faith community, you are responsible for your actions as well as the actions of your clergy, lay people or volunteers. If a court finds that your group could have done more to ensure the safety of the people in your programs, you may be found “vicariously liable” for the actions of a member of the clergy, a lay person or a volunteer.

Your best protection against vicarious liability is screening. A comprehensive and ongoing screening process, such as Volunteer Canada’s Safe Steps Screening Program, protects your faith community, your volunteers and the people you help. It demonstrates a moral, legal, and spiritual commitment on your part.

# Act Now!

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Though volunteer screening is gaining wider acceptance, many faith communities have yet to introduce such a process. Through its efforts, the **Ontario Screening Initiative** is working to increase participation in, and acceptance of, effective screening programs. To protect your volunteers and participants, use the points below to begin the process of introducing or improving a screening program in your faith community:

- find support from people in your congregation, clergy and lay people in implementing or improving the volunteer screening process;
- provide a copy of this booklet to members of your council;
- consult other faith communities about their screening policies and procedures;
- complete the Screening Standards worksheet available in the Screening in Faith workbook (available from Volunteer Canada);
- review existing screening policies and procedures in your community and identify any gaps.

**“I’ve come to see that screening is not only the right thing to do for our kids and our programs but that it has resulted in a better Sunday school.”**

*P. Leroux, Superintendent,  
St. Bartholomew’s Sunday  
School.*

Don’t be overwhelmed. Start by accomplishing one of the 10 Safe Steps, then build on your success.

*Contact your local volunteer centre for training and consultation help on screening in your area.*

Volunteer Canada is the national voice for volunteerism in Canada. We work closely with four provincial centres (including the federation of 109 volunteer centres in Québec), and 86 local volunteer centres throughout the country. Our shared mandate is to promote excellence in volunteerism in Canada. Our membership includes national charities, associations, non-governmental organizations, corporations, and individuals.

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