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.
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 organizations. 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.”

“The process of implementing screening for a community-based organization is a lengthy one, but it has proved an absolute necessity to ensure the safety of our clients and their caregivers.”

Angele Poitras, Executive Director, Meals on Wheels Sudbury
Frequently asked questions about the screening of volunteers

Q Does screening suggest that volunteers can’t be trusted?

A No. Like most forms of insurance, screening is intended to prevent the problem that likely won’t occur. However, screening addresses the reality that it is possible a person could seek out community support organizations 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 on the board of directors of an organization that provides services to vulnerable clients. Do I have to be concerned about screening?

A Absolutely! The board of directors is ultimately responsible (and as a result, potentially liable) for the services and programs run by the organization. It is in your best interests, as well as those that the organization serves, to establish ground rules that guide staff in designing appropriate screening measures.

Q On what basis can an organization refuse an applicant for a volunteer position?

A An applicant can be refused if his or her interests and experience do not meet the requirements of the position or if their background makes them unsuitable to work with vulnerable people.
Know the Facts

“Screening has made our volunteer program more successful and helped us to provide quality services to our clients.”

S. Jane Joris, Day Programs Coordinator, Senior Services Department, County of Lambton

- Three out of four Canadians volunteer, either formally or informally, doing things like – delivering meals to the elderly or frail or by offering to shop for someone – or by providing some other assistance – such as knitting hats for premature babies or playing the piano at a seniors’ centre.
- 32% of the population of Ontario engage in volunteer activity.
- Social service organizations accounted for 21% of the total volunteer hours contributed.
- 75% – 85% of all personal care to seniors is provided by family and friends. Kane, 1990

- More than two out of five volunteers say they became involved because someone from a voluntary organization asked them.
- In 1997, 67% of victims of sexual offences were attacked at home. Juristat, 1997

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

By knowing your obligations, being aware of the dangers, and seeking appropriate solutions you take the first step in protecting your organization, your volunteers, and your clients. 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 in your organization.

**Myth:** If a volunteer harms a client, the organization 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.

**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 an organization has been negligent, insurance may not provide coverage. Some insurance companies are now asking explicit questions about the organization’s screening of employees and volunteers. In any case, our main obligation is to protect people, not to compensate them after they are hurt.
The services your group 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 organization’s volunteers and those they serve. You want your organization to demonstrate a moral and ethical 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 an organization, you are responsible for your actions as well as the actions of your staff or volunteers. If a court finds that your organization 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 staff member or volunteer.

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

Though volunteer screening is gaining wider acceptance, many organizations 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 organization:

- find support from other board members, staff, and volunteers in implementing or improving the volunteer screening process in your organization;
- provide a copy of this booklet to members of your board/executive;
- consult similar organizations about their screening policies and procedures;
- complete the Screening Standards worksheet available in the Taking Care workbook (available from Volunteer Canada);
- review existing screening policies and procedures in your organization and identify the gaps.

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

“Realizing we already have processes in place that can be used as effective screening tools was encouraging!”

Lori Cooper, VON HNPE

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.