

# Going Beyond the Background Check: The Status of Volunteer Screening in San Mateo County Youth-Serving Organizations

**Friends for Youth, Inc.**

Prepared for the San Mateo County  
Board of Supervisors

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### **About Friends for Youth**

Since 1979, Friends for Youth has been committed to supporting youth through creating and cultivating friendships with adult volunteers, providing opportunities for enrichment and growth, and focusing on ways to help young people achieve their potential. More than 1,700 youth have been matched with caring adult mentors with a 90 percent success rate of creating long-term friendships.

### **About Friends for Youth's Mentoring Institute**

Since 1998, we have become a leader in the field of youth mentoring by helping thousands of organizations provide safe and effective services. We accomplish this goal by providing training, consultation, products, coalition leadership, networking, resources, and an annual mentoring conference. We continue to hold a stellar national reputation for disseminating information on safe and effective practices based upon our proven model and the latest research in the mentoring field.

We believe a successful youth mentoring program is made with care, determination, consistency, sustainability, well-trained staff, a network of service resources, and the community's commitment to make a difference. At Friends for Youth's Mentoring Institute, we are committed to helping youth mentoring programs provide mentoring relationships that will have the most positive impact on young people.



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## The Role of Adults in the Lives of Youth Today

Youth-serving organizations in San Mateo County play an important role in the welfare of children and youth.<sup>1</sup> They also serve to connect their young clients with adult and young adult volunteers who wish to help in a variety of ways and roles. This connection is crucial in the development of a young person. The Search Institute identified 40 Developmental Assets that help youth become productive and caring adults. Among these assets are having *Adult Role Models* and *Other Adult Relationships*, at least three or more non-parental adults who provide support.<sup>2</sup> Volunteers can assist with after-school programs, supervise sports activities, provide transportation, offer tutoring and homework help, make and serve meals, and be mentors. In fact, in 2006, more than 61 million people volunteered with organizations, and 27 percent of those (about 16.5 million) worked with youth-serving organizations.<sup>3</sup>

In all cases where volunteers have direct access to children and youth, some kind of relationship develops. The primary focus of Friends for Youth's Mentoring Institute is to serve mentoring and other youth-serving programs that include at least a component of mentoring. As such, the focus of this report will primarily address mentoring. The **SAFE** Training and recommendations discussed later, however, apply to any program in which volunteers work with youth.

Mentoring is described as a "relationship between an older, more experienced adult and an unrelated, younger protégé or mentee, characterized by ongoing guidance, instruction, and

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1 A youth-serving organization is any agency, governmental or non-governmental, that provides services for children, adolescents, and young adults, ages 0 – 24.

2 Scales, P., & Leffert, N. (2003). *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development* (2nd Ed). Minnesota, MN: Search Institute.

3 Corporation for National and Community Service. (2007). *Volunteering in America*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics.



encouragement provided by the adult and aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee."<sup>4</sup> Successful mentoring has been proven in research to be highly effective in several areas, including developing better relationships with families and decreasing delinquent behavior like skipping school, initiating alcohol and drug use, and getting into physical fights.<sup>5</sup> Jean Rhodes, a leading researcher in youth mentoring, found that mentoring relationships that last the expected duration also promote academic success and positive social behaviors.

However, relationships do have the potential to have damaging effects. Rhodes also found that a mentoring relationship that is terminated earlier than expected can cause setbacks in some of the impact areas mentioned above, compared to youth without mentors. More importantly, the impact of an abusive relationship within the context of mentoring can have longer-lasting and more damaging effects. It is clear from previous research and study with children who have experienced this kind of harm that child sexual abuse is an important, independent risk factor for psychological, physical, emotional, and interpersonal hardship.<sup>6</sup>

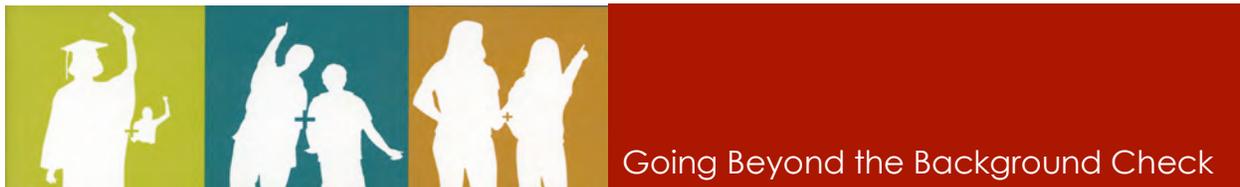
Screening volunteers effectively protects not only an organization's youth clients, but also the volunteers and the organization. Most volunteers become involved with youth-serving organizations because they want to positively impact children. Unfortunately, there are also individuals who specifically target these agencies, particularly mentoring and tutoring programs, in order to sexually abuse children. The nature of the program often gives volunteers one-on-one

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4 Rhodes, J. (2002). *Stand By Me*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pg. 3.

5 Bauldry, S. (2006). *Positive Support: Mentoring and Depression Among High-Risk Youth*. Philadelphia: P/PV

6 Briere, J., & Elliot, D. (1994). Immediate and Long-Term Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse. From *The Future of Children* (4)2, a publication of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Retrieved on November 25, 2005, from [http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr\\_doc/vol4no2ART2.pdf](http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/vol4no2ART2.pdf)



access to vulnerable youth. Ultimately, once volunteers are introduced to youth, programs cannot control whether they spend time together outside of the program, even if program policy prohibits it. Thorough screening practices, then, are essential to keeping children safe.

There are currently no consistent mandated standards for screening volunteers who work with youth. Programs are generally advised to assess the level of risk for the children served and then set screening standards.<sup>7</sup> One local regulation, the *Child Protection Ordinance* in the City of San Mateo,<sup>8</sup> is valuable and important for being the first of its kind in the nation, but the difficulty lies in administering and obtaining compliance. This legislation focuses on fingerprint-based background checks for volunteers working with children – a minimum component of any screening process – and staff/volunteer training related to child protection. While fingerprint-based background checks are recommended, other important application steps are not included. The *Child Protection Ordinance* also is largely unenforceable with only one staff member to regulate compliance of over 50 programs. Failure to adhere to the ordinance could result in being denied city funding, losing the ability to rent city facilities, or the possibility of civil penalties. To date, no programs have lost funding as a result of non-compliance (H. Stewart, personal communication, December 29, 2008).

### **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative in San Mateo County**

The **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative**, spearheaded by Friends for Youth's Mentoring Institute, aims to keep children and adolescents safe in relationships with volunteer adults and young

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<sup>7</sup> Saul, J., & Audage, N.C. (2007). *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures*. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

<sup>8</sup> City of San Mateo Child Protection Ordinance, <http://www.cityofsanmateo.org/index.asp?NID=233>



adults by enabling programs to effectively screen out child molesters. The **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative** is based on **SAFE (Screening Volunteers for Effectiveness): Guidelines to Prevent Child Molestation in Mentoring and Youth-Serving Organizations**, published by Friends for Youth in 2006. This unique resource was designed to help programs go “beyond a background check” by structuring volunteer intake processes to minimize the potential for child molestation. More specifically, **SAFE** trains youth-serving organizations to develop consistent and enforceable protocols for screening volunteers (see the **SAFE Process** box to the right). **SAFE** builds upon a review of research indicating that the most effective way to address child molestation is to educate youth professionals.

The **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative** developed out of recommendations from the **SAFE** Advisory Committee. Created in 2007, the Advisory Committee was charged with expanding the impact of safe and effective volunteer screening practices in San Mateo County. Specific recommendations from the Advisory Committee included the development of the *Education Campaign* and the *Compliance Campaign*. The *Education Campaign* was designed to spread awareness among youth-serving organizations of the potential for infiltration by child molesters. The *Compliance Campaign* explored strategies that would set standards and

### The SAFE Process

- Program Orientation
- Written Application
- In-person Interview
- State Level Fingerprint-based Background Check
- Federal Level Fingerprint-based Background Check
- Sex Offender Registry Check
- Child Abuse Registry Check (if allowable)
- Internet Search
- Driving Record
- Proof of Auto Insurance
- Character References
- Volunteer Training
- Red-Flag Training for Staff
- Final Assessment
- Completion of Process Prior to Start
- Ongoing Monitoring
- Re-screening



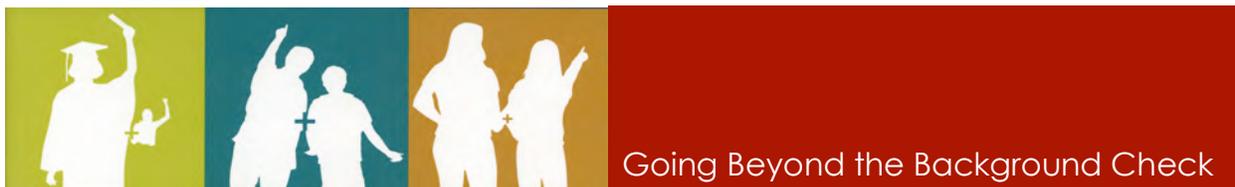
enforce protocols for volunteer mentor screening and monitoring. The two campaigns came together as the **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative** in San Mateo County to work in partnership with insurance agencies to create best practices guidelines; enact a voluntary compliance from programs that received **SAFE** training; and explore the creation of legislation specifying professional training and application/monitoring processes.

Since establishing the **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative**, Friends for Youth's Mentoring Institute received funding from two out of five separate requests. This resulted in moving forward with only one goal of the **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative**: offering four in-depth training workshops to youth-serving agencies in San Mateo County. The impact of these workshops is outlined below. Friends for Youth continues to seek funding opportunities to support the other goals from the **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative**.

The **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative** holds great promise for youth-serving organizations in San Mateo County. Professionals who undergo **SAFE** training become aware of "red flags" characteristic of child molesters. These individuals will then have the ability to identify inappropriate volunteers without solely relying on background checks.

**SAFE Training: Results and Impacts**

A survey of 13 participants of **SAFE** trainings (2007 – 2008) reveals some of the progress toward better volunteer screening in San Mateo County. **SAFE** training significantly affected participants' attitudes toward screening and also helped them improve their screening processes in concrete ways. For example, a volunteer coordinator said that her organization



added federal-level fingerprinting results after the **SAFE** training, and a program manager said that she shared what she learned from **SAFE** training at a manager's meeting to raise awareness about potential risks.

**SAFE** training helped participants understand the importance of screening. Another program manager said, "We gave too much credit to LiveScan." She also said that, in part because of the training, "I don't underestimate the kind of people who could be knocking on the door." A program staff member said the most important tool he got from **SAFE** training was, "Just being aware that people who molest kids come in any shape or form. It can be your next-door neighbor, who you think is an upstanding citizen." A case manager said, "I understood that [screening volunteers] was a procedure, and now I take it much more seriously...it's a very important part of our job, to keep our kids safe." A program manager explained that, "We get so excited for everyone who can tutor, but we need the right tutors. This is a serious process, and we can't just have bodies. We need to know who's volunteering with us."

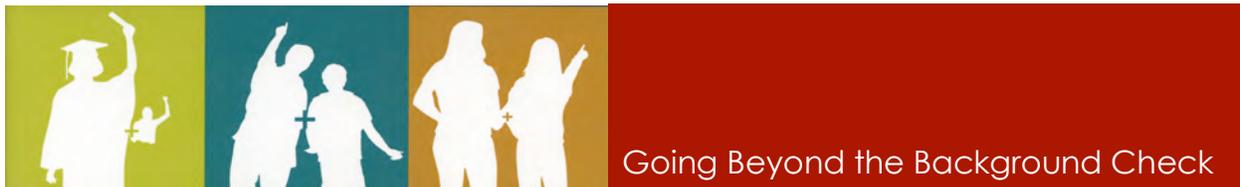
This individual is not alone in expressing such concerns: youth-serving organizations face the challenges of goals and outcomes, often tied to funding. **SAFE** training emphasizes that although there are few shortcuts to adequate volunteer screening, programs can tailor a process that fits their needs. As a program manager stated, "I thought [screening] was an annoyance: I've gotta fingerprint this guy, how could he be a child molester? [However,] I guess the reality is that these guys are sneaky enough that you may not see what's right in front of you ... I could fingerprint 500 people, and even if one got through and did something to a kid, I would not be able to live with myself."



**SAFE** training reinforced the value of volunteer screening for organizations that already had thorough screening procedures in place. It also reminded participants that it is often necessary to turn down a volunteer. A volunteer coordinator explained that, “I don’t turn away volunteers very often, but I always feel bad when I do. The training was reinforcement that not everyone is going to fit in: don’t push it if it doesn’t fit.” A program manager said the training emphasized that, “Just when you think it’s overkill and you’re going to alienate people, that’s when you find something.” Understanding that youth-serving organizations must make the youth their first priority instead of the volunteer is an important message in **SAFE** training.

**SAFE** training also helped participants hone their intuitions. A case manager said, “It was very good to have intuition reinforced and encouraged.” Another case manager stated that the take-away point of the training was “being able to differentiate between first impressions versus what someone’s true intentions might be.” One program staff member said that, because of **SAFE** training, “Now I go with my gut feeling. If I don’t feel good about someone, I’m not going to put them through the process to match them.” Several respondents came out of the training with an increased appreciation for the physical manifestations of intuition, such as a “funny feeling” in the stomach.

San Mateo County youth-serving organizations reported obstacles to effectively screening adult volunteers. For example, one respondent reported that her agency is “supposed to” complete all screening requirements before instating volunteers, but that “Sometimes we get in a bind; it takes a lot of time. We need a lot of staff.” From this feedback, it is clear that **SAFE** training gave



participants more confidence in the screening processes they had already implemented, advised them to add additional steps, and encouraged them to trust their intuitions.

### **National Picture of Child Molestation**

Nationally, child molestation is a problem of shocking proportions, often underreported because of victims' reluctance to disclose abuse. Hundreds of thousands of children are sexually abused every year. Some of these cases involve youth-serving organizations. Abel and Harlow studied approximately 4,000 adults who admitted to having molested a child. Of these, five percent said they had molested "a child left in my care by an organization."<sup>9</sup>

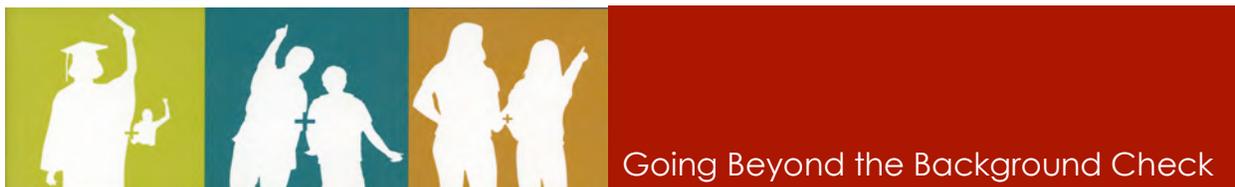
Media stories abound with reports of volunteers who sexually abuse children and adolescents left in their care. There are, however, no reliable statistics on how often this has actually occurred. A sampling of national newspaper articles offers instances of volunteer mentors accused of sexually abusing their mentees in the past several years. One man, a volunteer with USA Hockey and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Washtenaw County in Michigan, faced allegations from three young men. In 2008, he pleaded no contest to three counts of fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct in order to avoid prison time.<sup>10</sup> Another in Nashville, Tennessee, was indicted last year in several charges of aggravated sexual battery of a boy younger than 13 whom he met through the Big Pal-Little Pal program at Lee University.<sup>11</sup> The outcome is unknown in this situation. In another instance, a volunteer with Partners, a mentoring program in Boulder, Colorado, was

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<sup>9</sup> Abel, G., & Harlow, N. (2001). *The Stop Child Molestation Book*. Xlibris.

<sup>10</sup> Aisner, A. "Ann Arbor Youth Mentor Accused of Sexual Misconduct." Retrieved November 28, 2007 from [http://blog.mlive.com/annarbornews/2007/11/ann\\_arbor\\_youth\\_mentor\\_accused/print.html](http://blog.mlive.com/annarbornews/2007/11/ann_arbor_youth_mentor_accused/print.html)

<sup>11</sup> "Mentor Indicted For Sexual Battery of Boy." Retrieved on January 3, 2008 from <http://www.newschannel5.com/Global/story.asp?s=7570445>



convicted of sexually assaulting his mentee and sentenced to 20 years to life in prison. The experiences described by the mentee fit with current research on the grooming techniques employed by child molesters, even though the Executive Director of the mentoring program said he had “passed all screening and training and became a highly regarded mentor.”<sup>12</sup>

### **National Volunteer Screening Survey**

Nationally, volunteer screening practices are extremely variable, possibly explained by the lack of federally-mandated standards for volunteer screening. In 2008, The National Center for Victims of Crime published *Who's Lending A Hand?*, the first study of its kind. The report looks at volunteer screening practices among nonprofit organizations and indicates the depth of most agencies' standard screening practices.<sup>13</sup> The survey found that 12 percent of organizations surveyed do not screen volunteers in any way. Of these, 17 percent stated that they did not screen volunteers because of insufficient funds. About 25 percent explained that they did not screen volunteers because they did not think screening was useful. An additional 13 percent were afraid to offend volunteer applicants.

Of the organizations that do any screening, 72 percent do a background check. Of those that do background checks, only 31 percent do fingerprint-based criminal record checks. The rest of the background checks, presumably, are name-based, making it easier for an applicant to hide his or her identity. About 50 percent of the organizations performing background checks do so in

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<sup>12</sup> “Witness Says Sex Assault Suspect Surpassed Expectations as Volunteer.” *The Daily-Times Call*. December 13, 2006  
<sup>13</sup> Webster, M. & Whitman, J. (2008). *Who's Lending a Hand?: A National Survey of Nonprofit Volunteer Screening Practices*. The National Center for Victims of Crime. Retrieved on August 20, 2008 from <http://www.ncvc.org/ncvc/AGP.Net/Components/documentViewer/Download.aspxnz?DocumentID=44797>



more than one state or do a national check. The other 50 percent check in only one state, meaning that an applicant's records from other states (potentially containing convictions) will not appear. Screening, when it is done, plays an important role in volunteer organizations: 46 percent reported having identified volunteers who are "inappropriate" through screening. The fact that a significant number of organizations screened out applicants points to its importance.

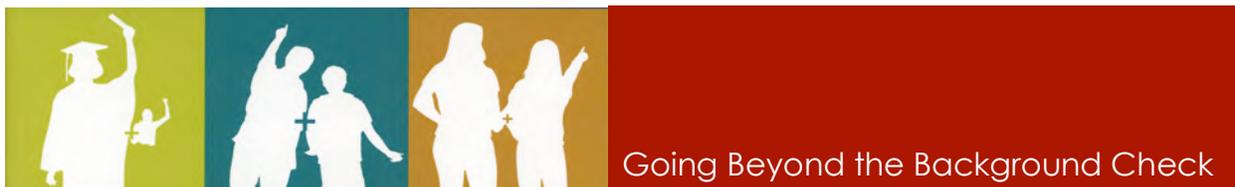
Volunteer screening is a challenging process for volunteer organizations. Of the organizations that reported challenges, 31 percent said that cost was the most significant obstacle. It is important to keep in mind that cost can encompass many aspects of the screening process. For example, cost could deter an organization from doing fingerprint-based federal-level background checks, or insufficient funds could make it more difficult for nonprofit organizations to have a full-time volunteer coordinator.

### **Child Molestation in San Mateo County**

In San Mateo County, child sexual abuse rates are lower than the average for the state of California. In 2007, there were 4.4 substantiated cases of child abuse per 1,000 children, compared to the statewide rate of 10.7 cases per 1,000 children. In 2007, sexual abuse accounted for 7.2 percent of all child abuse reports and 7.0 percent of substantiated reports in San Mateo County. That same year, 7.4 percent of children who entered foster care for the first time in 2006 did so because of sexual abuse.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Needell, B. et al. *Child Welfare Services Reports for California*. Retrieved on November 10, 2008 from <http://www.kidsdata.org>



Although child abuse reports generally deal with the conduct of parents and other relatives, child sexual abuse can occur in different settings and at the hands of non-parent adults.

Currently, there are 537 registered sex offenders in the Megan's Law database who reside in San Mateo County.<sup>15</sup> The county has experienced numerous cases of child molestation, some bizarre and horrifying. In 2007, John France Gonzales was arrested for allegedly keeping a young girl in his parents' house in Daly City and molesting her many times over several years.<sup>16</sup>

However, most cases of child sexual abuse involve individuals who are known to the child. While it appears that there are no cases involving a volunteer from a formal program abusing a child, San Mateo County has seen numerous incidents in recent years where trusted members of the community have committed sex offenses against youth in their professional capacity. The high-profile case of William Ayres, a child psychiatrist from San Mateo who allegedly molested numerous patients over many years, has been headline news.<sup>17</sup> Other local examples exist:

- In June 2007, a teacher at Capuchino High School was arrested for allegedly having a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old student.<sup>18</sup>
- In August 2008, a teacher at Mills High School in Millbrae pleaded no contest to charges that he had videotaped students in the girls' school restroom through a false ceiling. He also pleaded no contest to charges of child pornography possession.<sup>19</sup>

Schools are not the only places in which sex offenders have gained access to youth in San Mateo County. In fact, an audit performed by the County in 2008 found convicted sex offenders

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<sup>15</sup> California Megan's Law Database, Retrieved on November 4, 2008 from <http://www.meganslaw.ca.gov>

<sup>16</sup> Manekin, M. "Accused Child Molester Agrees to Stand Trial." *San Jose Mercury News*. November 14, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Coté, J. "Respected Child Psychiatrist Arrested on Molestation Charges." *San Francisco Chronicle*. April 6, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Abramson, M. "Sex Charges are Made Against High School Teacher" *San Jose Mercury News*. June 31, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Manekin, M. "Teacher Takes Plea Deal in Child-Porn Case." *San Jose Mercury News*. August 29, 2008.



at childcare and foster care facilities.<sup>20</sup> One sex offender was living in a foster care home in East Palo Alto. Police apparently knew about the offender because he was registered, but County officials were not told about his presence. Another sex offender, who was also registered in San Mateo County, was living in a childcare facility run by a relative. These situations occurred because information about sex offenders was only shared with law enforcement, not with licensing agencies for foster care and other services aimed at youth. As a result, representatives announced plans to introduce a state bill allowing local governments to make laws prohibiting registered sex offenders from living in the same dwelling as one another.

In addition, County agencies have experienced cases of child sexual abuse by paid employees.

For instance:

- In 2007, an adult counselor for youth working at a group home molested five boys. Since San Mateo County contracts with Project 90 to provide services at the facility, it is unclear whose responsibility it was to prevent this abuse.<sup>21</sup>
- In 2008, a former counselor at a San Mateo County Youth Services Center program was arrested for having sex with a minor. The girl was under his supervision.<sup>22</sup>

### **Volunteer Screening in San Mateo County**

How well do youth-serving organizations in San Mateo County screen their volunteers? A

telephone survey was conducted to explore this question. The programs surveyed included city

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<sup>20</sup> "San Mateo County Audit Finds Sex Offenders at a Child Care and Foster Care Facility." *California Chronicle*. May 9, 2008. Retrieved on October 17, 2008 from <http://www.californiachronicle.com/articles/view/61251>

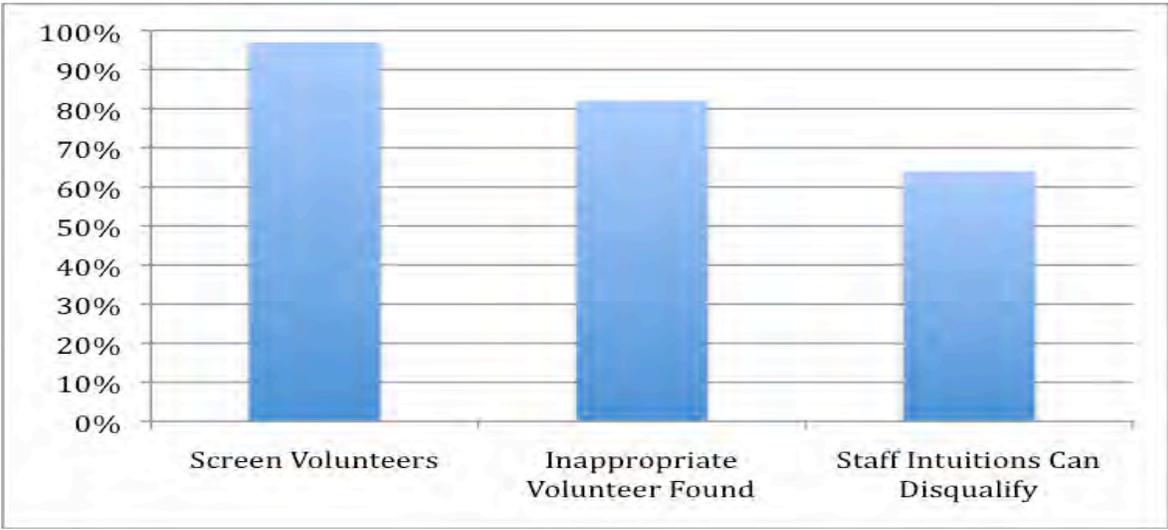
<sup>21</sup> Manekin, M. "Teens Can Sue San Mateo County for Sexual Abuse at Group Home." *Oakland Tribune*, January 15, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Manekin, M. "Man Faces Prison for Sex with Teen." *San Jose Mercury News*, June 17, 2008.



park and recreation departments, school districts, non-profit mentoring organizations, after-school programs, and others. Programs were asked about current screening procedures, including the number of screening steps they use in assessing a volunteer applicant, and challenges faced in screening volunteers.

The results from the survey are encouraging: 97 percent of the programs screen volunteers in some way. Out of 17 recommended screening steps, programs use between one and 16 steps.



**Figure 1: Key Findings from San Mateo County Youth-Serving Organization Survey**

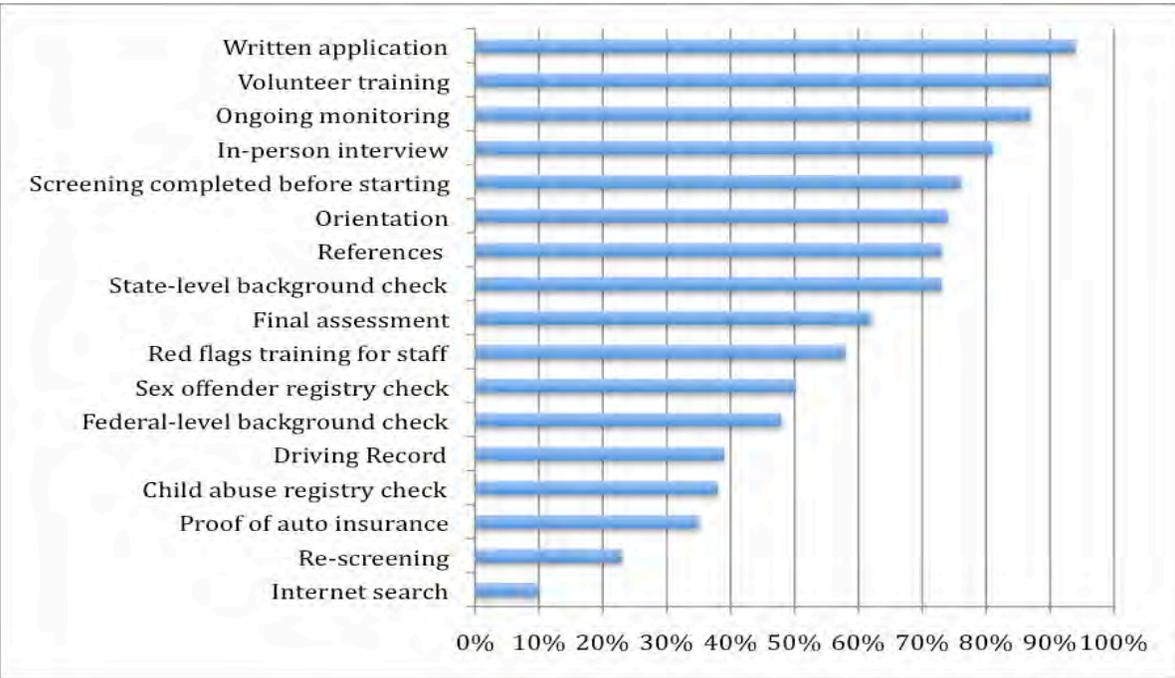
Of the programs that do some screening, 82 percent stated that their screening process had identified someone who was not appropriate for their program. Screening volunteers plays an essential role in helping programs determine both the safety and the fit of a volunteer. Because **SAFE** stresses the role of staff “gut reactions” to a volunteer applicant, respondents were asked whether or not this could eliminate a volunteer applicant from the pool. Overall, the answer was



“yes.” Sixty-four (64) percent of programs stated that staff intuitions could automatically disqualify a volunteer.

Figure 2 shows the percentages of programs that stated they perform each of the 17 recommended screening steps. Ten of the 17 steps are used by at least 50 percent or more of programs. The least utilized step, an Internet search, seemed to be unknown to most respondents, but some indicated they would incorporate it after learning about it.

The survey revealed a striking difference between the number of programs who perform a state-level background check versus those who perform a federal-level background check.



**Figure 2: Popularity of Screening Steps**



As Figure 3 illustrates, the majority of programs (72 percent) look for criminal history through California's Department of Justice, but less than half (48 percent) request information from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which is designed to check criminal records across all states. A state-level clearance only indicates that the applicant has not been convicted of a crime in that state. In its pilot stage, SafetyNET, a program that helps smaller programs obtain federal-level background history, found that 40% of potential mentors with criminal records had the record in another state. Crimes such as attempted rape, sexual battery, and oral copulation by force would have gone undiscovered with just a state-level check.<sup>23</sup>

When asked about what would automatically disqualify a volunteer, many organizations reported that they have "non-negotiables." The most popular of these, outside of criminal convictions involving violence and children, was appearance by an applicant in a sex offender registry (96 percent). Other

### Background Checks: Who's Checking What?

The term *background check* is used loosely and can be confusing. In the context of volunteer screening, a background check means a criminal records check. This is used to validate whether or not a volunteer applicant has been convicted of a crime. There are many private companies that perform background checks, but they range in quality and often cost more. The best criminal records checks are done through government agencies.

In California, all criminal records checks are fingerprint-based, a procedure called LiveScan. Fingerprint-based background checks are more reliable than name-based or Social Security number-based checks because it is more difficult for an applicant to lie about his or her identity. The **SAFE** process recommends both state (California Department of Justice) and federal (FBI) criminal records checks to ensure an applicant's entire set of records will be found.

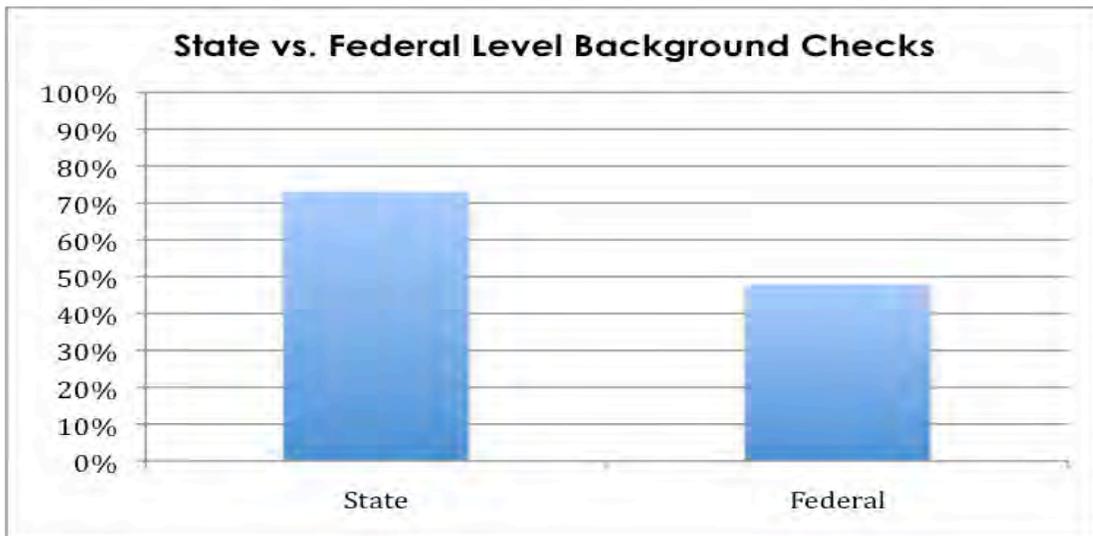
Another important background check is through the Megan's Law database. The Megan's Law database is a state-by-state registry of all resident sex offenders.

Inaccuracies in all of these methods are probable. For this reason, **SAFE** recommends to not relying solely upon their findings.

<sup>23</sup> MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership. (2008). *SafetyNET Program Manual*. Retrieved on January 20, 2009 from <http://www.mentoring.org/safetynet>



common non-negotiables are a child abuse report (93 percent of respondents); inappropriate material discovered on the Internet (66 percent); and a DUI (44 percent). Many programs do not have an official policy regarding their “non-negotiables,” only a sense of what would be inappropriate. Interestingly, while a great majority of programs would disqualify a potential applicant because of a child abuse report, many are not eligible to view this information. Access to the Child Abuse Central Index (CACI) is restricted and controlled for access only to select state and county programs.

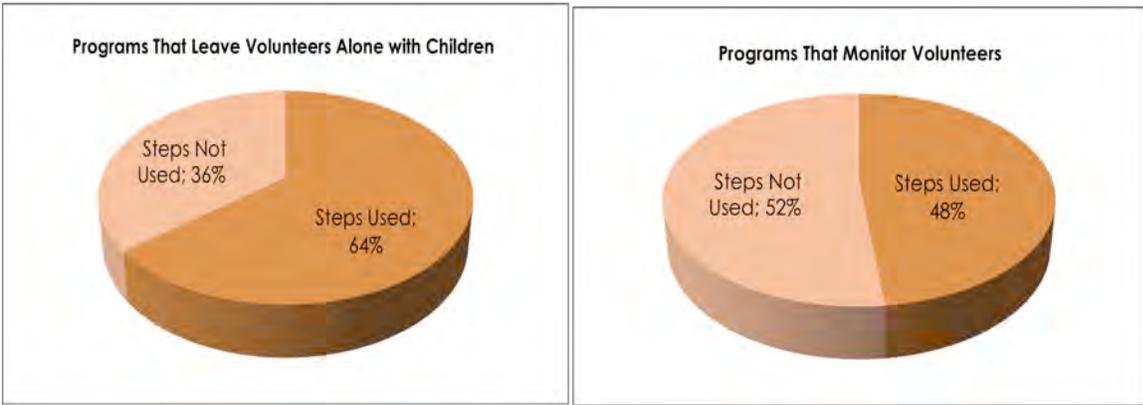


**Figure 3: State versus federal-level background checks**

Program structure impacts the amount of screening required for volunteers. Programs in which volunteers spend time alone with youth use an average of 11 screening steps out of 17. Programs that always monitor volunteers use an average of 8 steps. Programs in which youth are alone with volunteers are more likely to do an interview with prospective volunteers (89 percent,



compared to 67 percent for programs in which youth do not spend time alone with volunteers.) Fifty-six percent of programs in which volunteers spend time alone with youth perform a sex offender registry check, while only 36 percent of programs in which volunteers are constantly monitored do so. All three of the programs that use 16 out of 17 steps are mentoring programs. Two of the six programs that only use one screening step are after-school programs, and one is a program using parent volunteers. There is no overall correlation between the type of program (e.g., mentoring, after-school) and rigor of the screening process.



**Figure 4: Effects of Program Structure on Screening Process**

In this survey, a program’s annual number of volunteers does not significantly affect its screening process. Programs with fewer than 100 volunteers per year and those with 100 or more volunteers per year use an average of 10 screening steps. Programs with small and large numbers of volunteers are equally likely to check a sex offender registry. Both of the programs whose respondents did not know whether a sex offender registry check was part of their screening process had 100 or more volunteers per year. Seventy-two percent of programs with fewer than



100 volunteers complete all screening before allowing volunteers to start volunteering, while 81 percent of programs with 100 or more volunteers have this requirement.

Programs using youth volunteers are less likely to screen volunteers thoroughly and all reported that youth volunteers are never left unsupervised. Two of the six programs using youth volunteers have only one screening step, a written application. Responses from programs with youth volunteers exposed the added challenges of working with youth volunteers, especially from a volunteer screening standpoint. It is difficult to obtain information on youth volunteers:

fingerprint-based background checks are not an option if the applicant is under 18, and it can be more difficult to learn enough information from an interview with a young person because his or her communication skills may not be as developed as an adult's. Youth also can have many reasons for volunteering (such as required high school community service hours), which makes the issue of fit for the program more problematic. See Appendix B for a breakdown of the difference between screening steps used by programs with adult and youth volunteers.

	Average Number of Screening Steps
Adult Volunteers	11
Youth Volunteers	6

**Figure 5: Average Number of Screening Steps for Adult and Youth Volunteers**

The greatest challenge that programs seem to face in screening volunteers is staff time – either having enough staff people or existing staff having enough time. Cost, time to complete the screening process, and access to information about screening do not seem to be consistent problems. It is not surprising to see that time is not as much of a concern to programs: with the



development of LiveScan, fingerprint-based results can be received in a matter of days. Prior to 2005, inked fingerprint cards were mailed to Sacramento, then mailed on to the FBI, and programs would receive results up to several months later.

### **Next Steps: Goals and Recommendations**

Results from the *San Mateo County Youth-Serving Organization Survey* are encouraging: 97 percent of programs screen volunteers in some way, compared with 88 percent nationwide. These findings may have been affected by the close proximity of neighboring programs and, hopefully, programs' knowledge of Friends for Youth's work and resources. Most of the respondents to the survey were familiar with Friends for Youth and many had already received a copy of **SAFE (Screening Volunteers for Effectiveness): Guidelines to Prevent Child Molestation in Mentoring and Youth-Serving Organizations** in 2006.

Although the vast majority of programs in the County that use volunteers to work with youth do screen, few conduct the recommended and thorough 17-step process. Most use a written application, some check online in the sex offender registry, and few do any other online search. While the standard recommendation is to assess program risk and then determine the level of screening (and it appears most programs from this survey generally follow this guideline), programs ultimately have no control over the amount and kind of contact a volunteer may have with a youth client.

Moving forward, the **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative** aims to complete goals established by the Advisory Committee. The results from the **SAFE Training Survey** indicate its effectiveness: all of the



respondents in the survey would recommend the training to a colleague, and all indicated they would improve their program's screening process. Reviewing material in **SAFE (Screening Volunteers for Effectiveness): Guidelines to Prevent Child Molestation in Mentoring and Youth-Serving Organizations** is important, but hearing from someone in law enforcement who has actually worked with child predators allows program staff to experience red flags. Hearing, seeing, and recognizing these signs will become easier in practice.

In 2009 and 2010, Friends for Youth's Mentoring Institute will seek to broaden the impact of the *Education Campaign* and the *Compliance Campaign*. With more funding, the *Education Campaign* could reach more program staff with trainings and presentations. The *Compliance Campaign* could continue to seek supporters and spokespersons, including partnership and/or sponsorship opportunities with organizations that could offer publicity, mass appeal, and more generalized implementation of **SAFE** practices. This kind of awareness would have an especially significant impact on organizations in which case managers have difficulty convincing others of the importance of screening. The *Compliance Campaign* could also research and advocate for legislation mandating standards in volunteer screening at the city, county, and state levels.

There are significant obstacles to the implementation of the **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative**. Funding continues to be a problem for a number of youth-serving organizations, including Friends for Youth's Mentoring Institute. Many programs cannot secure resources to do a thorough screening process, either because of the cost of screening itself or because insufficient funding prevents them from hiring full-time volunteer and/or program coordinators. In addition, programs often feel pressure to meet goals, especially when these goals are tied to funding.



Having youth on a waiting list can increase a program's sense of urgency in finding adult volunteers to meet this need.

Without adequate funding for the **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative**, Friends for Youth's Mentoring Institute will be unable to provide this high-quality training to local (or to state, national, and international) mentoring and youth-serving program staff. Resources are needed for staff salaries, consultant fees, materials, and other expenses. Many previously supportive foundations and organizations are shifting their priorities to "basic needs" and, as such, no longer fund initiatives aimed at protecting children and youth.

While it is apparent that San Mateo County mentoring and youth-serving programs are doing better than a national average in terms of volunteer screening, it is also clear that this is not enough. Even one incident of child sexual abuse is too much, especially for programs that are meant to do more good than harm. We encourage San Mateo County to become a "model county" when it comes to mentoring and youth-serving programs by providing funding for training and expanded screening processes for programs; raising awareness of the issue to all agencies and organizations that engage volunteers to work with children; and implementing regulations for mandatory screening practices.



## Appendix A

### Survey Methodology

The *San Mateo County Youth-Serving Organization Survey* was conducted over the telephone during November and December of 2008. In total, 94 programs were contacted about the survey. Of these, 31 completed the survey, 19 responded that they did not qualify for the survey (i.e. they did not have volunteers working with youth), 3 refused to complete the survey, and the remainder did not respond to telephone calls. The programs were found using the Community Information Program database of youth services, along with databases for the Mentoring Coalition of San Mateo County and Bay Area Mentoring. The survey asked about programs' volunteer screening practices and the obstacles they faced in screening volunteers.

The **SAFE Training Survey** was conducted during October and November of 2008. Thirty-one (31) past **SAFE Training** participants were contacted. Of these, 15 completed the survey, and 16 did not respond to telephone calls. The survey asked about participants' perceptions of the training and how their attitudes toward screening and the screening processes had changed as a result of the training.



## Appendix B

Comparison of programs which leave volunteers alone with children and which always monitor volunteers

