



Going Beyond the Background Check:

The Status of Volunteer Screening in San Mateo County Youth-Serving Organizations

Executive Summary

Youth-serving organizations in San Mateo County, as well as across the country, play an important role in the welfare of children and youth. With as many as 16.5 million people volunteering with youth-serving agencies in the U.S., it is critical for programs to know how to effectively screen volunteers without relying solely upon background checks. Even one incident of child sexual abuse is too much, especially for programs that are meant to do more good than harm.

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 by enabling programs to effectively screen out child molesters. Based on **SAFE (Screening Volunteers for Effectiveness): Guidelines to Prevent Child Molestation in Mentoring and Youth-Serving Organizations**, a resource published in 2006, **SAFE Training** draws on the latest research about child molesters to help program staff become familiar with the complex set of characteristics and behaviors exhibited by many of them. Developed using recommendations from the **SAFE Advisory Committee** in 2007, the **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative** is focused on working within San Mateo County to educate youth-serving programs, create best practices guidelines with insurance companies, promote voluntary compliance from programs that have received the **SAFE** training, and develop legislation specifying professional training and application/monitoring processes. Funding received in 2008 provided the opportunity to offer four in-depth trainings to programs in San Mateo County.

SAFE Training: Results and Impact

A survey of 13 participants of **SAFE** trainings (2007 – 2008) reveals some of its impacts:

- Participants understood the importance of screening their volunteers. One program staff said the most important tool 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."
- Participants learned to "trust their gut feeling" when working with volunteer applicants. Another program staff said that she, "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."
- Participants received concrete suggestions on improving their organizations' screening processes.

Child Molestation and Volunteer Screening Nationwide

Hundreds of thousands of children are sexually abused every year in the United States. Currently, there are no reliable statistics on how often volunteers have sexually abused youth through formal programs, but it is documented. Without federally-mandated standards for volunteer screening, the possibility for this to happen is too great. A survey in 2008 about



volunteer screening practices among nonprofits found a great deal of variation; 12 percent of organizations surveyed do not screen volunteers in any way. Of those who perform a background check, only 31 percent used fingerprint-based criminal records checks and only about 50 percent of those check in more than one state. Forty-six percent reported having identified volunteers who were “inappropriate” through screening.

Child Molestation and Volunteer Screening in San Mateo County

San Mateo County has a much lower rate of child sexual abuse than the average for California: 4.4 substantiated reports of child abuse per 1000 children compared to 10.7 for the entire state. While it appears there are no cases involving a volunteer from a formal program abusing a child, there have been numerous incidents where trusted members of the community have committed sex offenses against children in their professional capacity. Friends for Youth’s Mentoring Institute conducted a telephone survey of 31 youth-serving organizations in San Mateo County to explore screening practices. Among the findings:

- 97 percent screen volunteers in some way.
- Of the programs that do screen, 82 percent identified someone who was not appropriate.
- In 69 percent of programs, staff intuition can automatically disqualify an applicant.
- Of programs engaging youth volunteers, 33 percent use only one screening step.
- The biggest challenge to effective screening is staff time.

Next Steps: Goals and Recommendations

While it is encouraging to discover that a great majority of programs require some kind of screening process for volunteers, few conduct the recommended and thorough 17-step process. Programs ultimately have no control over the amount and kind of contact a volunteer may have with a youth client. The **SAFE Volunteer Mentor Initiative** aims to complete its goals and continue to educate more programs on safe and effective screening practices. Faced with the scarcity of significant resources, it will be difficult to secure funding to provide this high-quality training to local (or state, national, and international) mentoring and youth-serving program staff. We encourage San Mateo County to become a “model county” when it comes to mentoring and youth-serving programs by (1) providing funding for training and to support expanded screening processes for programs; (2) raising awareness of the issue to all agencies and organizations that engage volunteers to work with children; and (3) implementing regulations for mandatory screening practices.

Read the full report,
Going Beyond the Background Check,
and find out what you can do to improve your volunteer screening process:

www.friendsforyouth.org/SAFE.html