

Application and Screening Process for North Carolina 4-H Volunteers

Introduction

As an organization that deals largely in work with children and youth, North Carolina 4-H Youth Development is committed to the creation of a safe environment for learning and participation. The exercise of reasonable care in the confrontation of reasonably foreseeable risk is indeed a responsibility of any community-serving organization, particularly those serving vulnerable populations, including children, the elderly, and/or individuals with disabilities. Screening volunteers and staff, therefore, is a responsibility of these service agencies. In addition, organizations also need to screen those who handle funds, drive vehicles, or serve in other areas that may pose particular risks.

An appropriate screening process assesses and responds to the risks presented by a position, the person holding the position, their service recipients, and danger to others. As a nonprofit organization, there is a legal duty to screen those who will be serving the organization's clients. Failure to screen may implicate the agency in liability, even if an individual's conduct is illegal, immoral or in flagrant violation of the rules of the organization.

There are two aspects of the organization's legal responsibility. First is the responsibility to screen in a reasonable manner those who wish to work with the clients of the organization. The second aspect is the organization's fair treatment and respect for the privacy of the personal information provided by potential volunteers.

Considering these responsibilities, the following guidelines and standards have been developed and/or revised for use by North Carolina 4-H Extension Agents and staff members working with youth and involving volunteers in their local programs.

Rationale

- North Carolina Cooperative Extension must provide a reasonably safe environment for youth participating in its programs.
- An application and screening process is a method of strengthening recruitment and placement of volunteers in North Carolina Cooperative Extension.
- Extensive media coverage has enhanced society's awareness of child abuse. Because of concerns surrounding the issue, most major youth-serving agencies have instituted screening processes.
- Employers may be liable for negligent hiring and placement of employees/volunteers in situations where screening processes are not utilized.
- The credibility of North Carolina 4-H Youth Development is increased through the use of appropriate application and screening processes for the placement of volunteers.

Position Descriptions

Before beginning the process of recruitment, as the volunteer administrator the first step is assessing the needs of the organization. What tasks or jobs need to be accomplished? Is it an appropriate assignment for a volunteer? How long will it take to accomplish the task? Are there long-term needs that can be met by individuals or teams of individuals? What kind of gap exists between what currently exists in the community and what should exist? Are these services or products options for your agency to provide to the community? These are questions that an advisory committee may be able to help answer.

The second step in recruiting is actually writing position descriptions for the identified assignments. These position descriptions are the first step in being reasonable in terms of legal responsibility to the individual and to the agency. By identifying the title ("volunteer" is not a title; it is a pay status), a description of the assignment, an outline of the responsibilities, the specific outcomes or goals, the training and support plan, reporting requirements, time commitment, necessary qualifications and any benefits for the volunteer, this position description becomes a critical component in the search for volunteers. By adding a signature/date line for the volunteer and for the staff member, this position description becomes the volunteer's scope of responsibility, outlining the specifics for which he/she is being placed in the organization.

Application and Screening

Individuals wishing to be involved as volunteers in the North Carolina 4-H program must be screened at an appropriate level. The following guidelines should serve to ensure adequate screening of volunteers:

Level 1: Full Application, Reference Checks, Criminal History, Interview

Any volunteer who works or may potentially work with children or youth in situations unsupervised by a paid employee or by a screened, experienced volunteer. These positions will include, though may not be limited to:

- Organizational Club Leaders
- Chaperons for any overnight events
- Camp Volunteers
- Volunteers who will have access to funds raised on behalf of 4-H
- Volunteers who will have access to confidential records or information

The criminal history check should be conducted at the county level for any county in which the applicant has resided during the past seven years. For volunteers whose county of residence has changed during the previous seven years, each county of residence should be checked for criminal history. This is the minimum acceptable level of screening for criminal history.

Note that any volunteer whose position description includes transporting children to and/or from any 4-H event or activity must also submit to a driving records check to insure thorough screening and reasonable safety precautions.

Level 2: Full Application, Reference Checks, Interview

Any volunteer who works closely with children or youth but who will be largely in supervised situations, or one who has lived within the community for more than 10 years and can provide adequate references to satisfy the agent and/or volunteer advisory board through their reference reviews. These positions will include, though may not be limited to:

- Club activity leaders
- Special Interest volunteers

Level 3: Episodic Volunteer Application

Any volunteer who serves in a short-term, project-specific role, and who will either not be in direct contact with children or youth or who will only be in situations directly supervised by paid and/or screened, experienced volunteer. These positions will include, though may not be limited to:

- Concession stand workers for single events
- Presentation Judges
- Summer activity presenters
- Fashion Revue Judges

Level 4: Youth Volunteer Application, References, Interview

Any volunteer between the ages of 12 and 19 who serves in the 4-H program as a youth volunteer. These volunteers may or may not be 4-H members. These positions will include, though may not be limited to:

- Afterschool club junior leaders
- Afterschool tutors or activity leaders
- Office volunteers
- 4-H Club Teen Leaders

Note: While some active 4-H members are involved in community service and volunteer activities through their plans for the year, more and more county programs find that additional teenaged youth are interested in participating in the service aspects of the program. This application targets the collection of basic information for those who have no files as program participants, though an agent may decide to have all

teen volunteers complete the application. The youth application does not require the collection of social security numbers and utilizes only reference checks without criminal history checks.

If the county 4-H program involves classroom teachers, afterschool staff paid from sources other than Extension, parks and recreation staff, or others who are primarily involved in 4-H through their relationship with another agency, a letter from that entity indicating their screening process should be requested. If their process is at least as rigorous as that required by 4-H, and the check has been conducted within the past two years, their letter of confirmation that the criminal history has been reviewed will be sufficient to prevent the necessity of running an additional criminal background screening.

The application file should be updated at any time that a volunteer's status in the program changes or following a period of more than 12 months of inactivity in the 4-H program.

Note: If afterschool or parks/recreation staff are chaperoning overnight or weekend 4-H events, they should be screened at Level 1 with a background check or a letter from their employer indicating that the background check was completed and the date of the check should be included in that file. If the criminal history review is more than two years old, a new criminal history review should be completed.

A personnel file should be created for all volunteers. These files must be maintained in locked file cabinets not accessible to the public, and treated as confidentially as possible. The following items should be placed in the personnel file of non-paid staff:

- Completed, signed and dated volunteer application
- Signed background check consent form (if applicable)
- Background information from references
- Completed, signed and dated reference forms OR
completed, signed and dated phone reference forms
- Strengths and Preferences Form
- Signed, dated Standards of Behavior and Volunteer Agreement form
- Media Release Form
- Training Record
- Volunteer Time Sheets or Record of Volunteer Hours
- Evaluation Forms
- Updates
- Other Relevant Information

Some situations require the agent and the volunteer advisory board to make a judgment call. Questions should be directed to the County Extension Director and the county volunteer board.

The 4-H Agent is responsible for:

1. Organizing a county 4-H volunteer advisory board and staffing it with three or more well-trained, experienced county 4-H leaders.
2. Providing training on the application and screening process with volunteers and other Extension staff.
3. Reviewing confidentiality requirements with advisory board members, including signed statements indicating their understanding of confidentiality in relationship to this assignment.
4. Making the final decision about accepting a prospective volunteer into the program.

Any Extension Agent who works with youth through volunteers is responsible for:

1. Being knowledgeable about the current volunteer application and screening process.
2. Keeping the 4-H agent apprised of any questionable situations involving volunteers.
3. Making the final decision, in consultation with the 4-H agent and/or county Extension director, about accepting a volunteer into their program.

The Process

- Individual indicates interest in becoming a 4-H volunteer.
- 4-H representative (agent, program associate/assistant, volunteer) shares information about types of volunteer opportunities available in the county 4-H program and provides copy of application materials and a position description for the role being considered.
- Individual completes application forms and returns information to the County Extension Center.
- 4-H representative and/or volunteer advisory committee follows up by:
 - Conducting follow up interview with prospective volunteer
 - Conducting reference checks by phone or mail
 - Conducting criminal history checks if appropriate

Note: References must be checked if the applicant has been convicted of misdemeanors or felonies. Individuals with felony convictions must be carefully considered. There are few positions for which these applicants may be placed; however, each case should be considered individually.

A criminal background check is a part of the screening process rather than a selection criterion. In the context of North Carolina 4-H and its volunteer programs, individuals who will be in direct contact with children and other populations identified as vulnerable through state and/or federal law must be thoroughly screened. For any applicant, the Sex Offender's Registry should be checked (<http://sbi.jus.state.nc.us/DOJHAHT/SOR/Default.htm>).

For any position that allows or requires substantial contact with vulnerable populations, personal safety must be the first consideration. Crimes against persons, therefore, should be the focal point in decisions about placement in the organization. As a youth-serving organization, it is generally necessary to disqualify from consideration anyone whose criminal history includes convictions for:

Sexual abuse of children,
Conviction for any crime in which children were involved, and/or
History of any violence or sexually exploitative behavior.

Other offenses become relevant depending on the position for which the individual is applying.

Criminal history checks should be conducted by a contracted agreement with an agency or organization outside of Extension. Several methods of conducting the checks are available and can meet the standard of reasonable caution. In local programs, local law enforcement officers may provide the service for youth organizations at little or no cost. In some counties, the Clerk of Superior Court's office may have staff members who can conduct the local checks. Some counties, in which criminal history checks are conducted for potential employees, will also run the criminal history checks for county 4-H programs as part of their human resources program. Additionally, there are many businesses that will, for contracted rates, conduct the checks for the local program.

- A decision should be made at this point about the acceptance or registration of the applicant as a 4-H volunteer. With advice from the volunteer advisory board, the 4-H agent, in consultation with the County Director in special situations, must make the final decision. If there is not a position in the program to match the potential volunteer's interests and skills or if the reference and/or background reviews indicate relevant issues or concerns, a letter of refusal should be mailed to the individual.
- If the decision is to place the potential volunteer in the organization, send the volunteer the Standards of Behavior document to review, sign and return. Also send the written position description for signature by the volunteer.
- Send a letter of appointment to the volunteer welcoming him/her to a position in the county 4-H program. Schedule a visit to confirm the individual's commitment to the organization and to establish a schedule for initial orientation and training.
- Work with volunteer to assume responsibility as a 4-H volunteer.

- Application, reference information and other materials are maintained in applicant's personnel file. File information, including applications and self-disclosure of any changes in criminal history, should be reviewed and updated at least once every 24 months to insure current files. Based on any changes revealed during this update process, a volunteer's status in the program should be evaluated for continuation, change of placement, or dismissal.

For Current Volunteers

Either through a special meeting or a special mailing, share the newly revised forms with the existing volunteers with a cover letter explaining the need to update the current application on file for everyone in the program. Set a specific deadline for return of the forms. Encourage questions and discussion to insure that all volunteers are comfortable with the process. Review materials provided utilizing the revised application materials and forward either letters of appointment or letters of dismissal.

Meet with the volunteers individually or in groups to get position descriptions signed and all files updated.

Dismissal of Volunteers

Volunteers are appointed to positions of program responsibility in North Carolina's Cooperative Extension by the Extension Agent or his/her representative. It is suggested that a volunteer advisory board assist with this function. Volunteers may also be removed from service by the Extension Agent using the following steps. Removal is entirely within the discretion of 4-H, and should be considered anytime a volunteer's conduct could impede or harm the 4-H goals or activities.

1. Upon consultation with the County Extension Director and/or volunteer advisory board, an immediate suspension may be enacted while an investigation is being conducted.
2. The volunteer will be notified in writing by the Extension Agent specifying the allegations under review. This notice also includes the immediate and/or long-term possible outcomes, including the dismissal of the individual as a 4-H volunteer.
3. The Extension Agent will provide an opportunity for the volunteer to respond to the allegations and provide additional or contradictory information pertinent to the situation.
4. The Extension Agent, in consultation with the County Extension Director and/or volunteer advisory board, will review the allegations and other evidence, deciding on an appropriate course of action.

The Extension Agent should keep a complete record of all documents and actions taken whenever dismissal of a volunteer is considered. The Extension Agent and County Extension Director will consult with the District Director and other appropriate Extension Administration any time there is a serious incident involving a volunteer.