

# Screening for a Safe Camp Season

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Declining COVID-19 case numbers and greater availability of vaccines are creating optimism about the ability to return to some forms of in-person youth programming. As organizations like camps begin to contemplate safely re-opening their doors, there are many critical questions to answer. Will we require masks? How can we enforce social distancing? Should we require staff to show proof of vaccination? Public health measures must absolutely be

prioritized, but other safety risks cannot be overshadowed. Specifically, after so many months away, organizations should review practices for creating an environment free from abuse. How can we re-animate our efforts on youth protection? What do we need to do to safely ramp our operations back up? A big part of getting back to business is screening staff and volunteers.

From an abuse prevention perspective, the purpose of screening employees and volunteers is to gather information to determine whether this person should be able to have access to youths in the program. A robust screening program will allow the organization to determine whether the applicant has the maturity needed for the role and is willing to maintain appropriate boundaries with youths. It also communicates to applicants how seriously your organization takes its responsibility to ensure the safety of its participants.



Camps are already starting to hire staff for the summer of 2021, and many anticipate a high number of camper registrations after months and months of being at home. Camps ramping up quickly should be careful not to cut corners during momentum hiring. A comprehensive screening process is critical to set the stage for a safe camp season. In addition to running background checks (which only yield results for criminal convictions), gather as much information as possible to create a behavioral profile of applicants. Asking the right questions and knowing what kind of responses are problematic will serve an organization more than just checking the box. Here are some red flags to watch for as you review other sources of information:

- **Applications.** Gaps in employment dates, conflicting information, incomplete information, over-involvement with youths, vague reasons for leaving previous jobs.
- **Interviews.** Defensive responses, evasive responses, themes of wanting to “save” children, themes of



relating to youth more as peers, patterns of poor boundaries with youths.

- **References.** Reluctant references, doesn't know the applicant well, themes of the applicant having outside contact or being alone with youths.

Remember that screening is just the first step in your abuse prevention efforts. Organizations will need to be very intentional in keeping this animated in their operations. New staff will still need to be trained – and returning staff refreshed – on essential concepts such as boundaries, recognizing red flag behaviors in adults and youths, and responding to concerns or disclosures of abuse. After months of not being in contact with youths, it is reasonable to expect everyone to be rusty – and drift from standard should be anticipated and addressed.

Keeping abuse prevention practices front-of-mind may be more challenging given the immediate public health safety measure that will need to be adopted this season. However, this year, perhaps more than ever, youths need a safe place to recreate, learn new skills and (re)establish social connections. A safe experience at camp delivers on all fronts.

All background checks are NOT created equal. Praesidium recommends four key checks for screening applicants who will work with youths:

- **National Sex Offender Registry Check.** A DOJ National Sex Offender Registry Search is a real time search of all offenders currently located on the National Sex Offender Public Website, encompassing records from all 50 U.S. States, the District of Columbia, U.S. Territories and various tribal authorities.
- **Multi-State Check.** A Multi-State Criminal and Sex Offender Database contains millions of court, incarceration, sex offender, terrorist watch list, and fraud database records compiled from across the country that will be searched for your applicant's name.
- **County Check(s).** A County Criminal Record Search is a search of criminal records housed at the central courthouse in a given jurisdiction. The majority of criminal cases in the U.S. are tried in county courts and records found here will include both felonies and misdemeanors related to violations of state laws. Best practice is to include every county the applicant has lived, worked or gone to school in over the last seven years.
- **Social Security Trace.** An SSN Trace is a database check that will reveal name and address information associated with an applicant's provided SSN. This will help develop additional aliases and address information for further criminal research.