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NEWS

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STUDY FINDS TROUBLING GAPS IN VOLUNTEER SCREENING BY NONPROFITS

Washington, DC –One in three U.S. nonprofit organizations conducts no background checks on volunteers, and roughly one in eight does no screening at all, says a report released today by the National Center for Victims of Crime, the nation’s leading advocacy group for crime victims. Although the majority of surveyed nonprofit human service organizations conduct some screening, most agencies that serve vulnerable populations could benefit from more thorough and comprehensive volunteer screening practices.

Who’s Lending a Hand? A National Survey of Nonprofit Volunteer Screening Practices sought to identify the characteristics of organizations that regularly screen volunteers, the screening methods used, and the role of these screening results in organizational decision making. The urgency of such questions has risen in recent years, as millions of volunteers (61 million in 2006)¹ donate billions of hours, sometimes serving in roles previously reserved for paid staff. Thorough security practices, according to the National Center, play a critical role in protecting vulnerable clients from harm and nonprofit organizations from liability.

“Incomplete screening creates unacceptable risks,” said Mary Lou Leary, executive director of the National Center for Victims of Crime. “Although most nonprofits do fairly well in some areas, our survey found troubling gaps in the screening of volunteers.”

Key findings include the following:

- 12 percent of organizations reported no screening of volunteers.
- 22 percent of those that screen their volunteers do not call references.
- 25 percent of organizations that say they screen volunteers do not conduct any type of background check.
- 66 percent of organizations that conduct background checks do not check fingerprint databases, the most reliable form of criminal background check.

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Organizations that do not screen volunteers reported a variety of reasons, including the cost of screening, questions about the usefulness of screening, and concerns about offending potential volunteers. Of those that do screen, nearly 50 percent had identified “inappropriate” volunteers through screening.

“For nonprofits that serve vulnerable people, failure to screen volunteers may prove far more costly than background checks,” said Mary Lou Leary. “To protect their reputations, their resources, and—above all—those who depend on them, nonprofits should review their screening practices and fill any current gaps.”

The National Center for Victims of Crime recommends that nonprofits take the following measures to improve their volunteer screening practices:

- Consistently and comprehensively screen volunteers, particularly if they will work directly with clients or have access to sensitive client information.
- Include in-person interviews, personal and professional reference checks, and national criminal background checks of names and, if possible, fingerprints.
- Check state databases, such as child and adult protective services, in states where volunteers have lived.
- Decide which histories will disqualify volunteers, screen for such histories, and re-screen at regular intervals.

A recent ChoicePoint audit of 3.7 million background screenings conducted between 2002 and 2007 affirms the findings of *Who's Lending a Hand?* The audit found that more than 189,000 individuals with at least one criminal conviction had attempted to gain employment or volunteer status with a nonprofit organization; of those, more than 2,700 were registered sex offenders.

“I hope these reports raise awareness and inspire nonprofits to protect vulnerable populations so that we may all work together to ensure a safer, more secure society,” said Derek V. Smith, chairman and CEO of ChoicePoint.

Who's Lending a Hand? A National Survey of Nonprofit Volunteer Screening Practices, which was supported by a grant from ChoicePoint, Inc., is available at www.ncvc.org. The ChoicePoint audit is available at www.choicepoint.com/nonprofit/white_papers.html.

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The National Center for Victims of Crime is dedicated to forging a national commitment to help victims of crime rebuild their lives. The National Center's National Crime Victim Helpline, 1-800-FYI-CALL, offers victims supportive counseling, practical information about crime and victimization, referrals to local community resources, and skilled advocacy in the criminal justice and social service systems.

¹ Corporation for National and Community Service, “Volunteering in America,” (Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007).