



CONNECTIONS

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF
FRIENDS FOR YOUTH'S MENTORING INSTITUTE

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

In January, Friends for Youth's Mentoring Institute completed a report prepared especially for the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors about the effectiveness of programs in our area when it comes to screening their volunteers who work with children and youth. What we found was reassuring in some ways, but also concerning; many organizations are still not meeting the recommended level of assessment, especially when using youth as volunteers. This issue of *Connections* is devoted to our findings from the report.

**To view the entire report or to order
SAFE (Screening Applicants for Effectiveness):
Guidelines to Prevent Child Molestation in
Mentoring and Youth-Serving Organizations
go to**

<http://www.friendsforyouth.org/SAFE.html>

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.

Screening volunteers continues to be an issue for youth mentoring programs. In the recently released *Impact Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Education's Student Mentoring Program* report, "approximately one in ten mentors reported not having undergone a reference or background check despite being required by the program as a condition of the grant." While some of these mentors may not remember going through their program's process, this statistic is still alarming.



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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 and 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 telephone survey of SAFE training participants (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, "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 variation¹; 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.

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 Starting
- Ongoing Monitoring
- Re-screening

CHILD MOLESTATION AND VOLUNTEER SCREENING IN SAN MATEO COUNTY

San Mateo County has a much slower 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.*

¹ *Who's Lending a Hand? A National Survey of Nonprofit Volunteer Screening Practices*

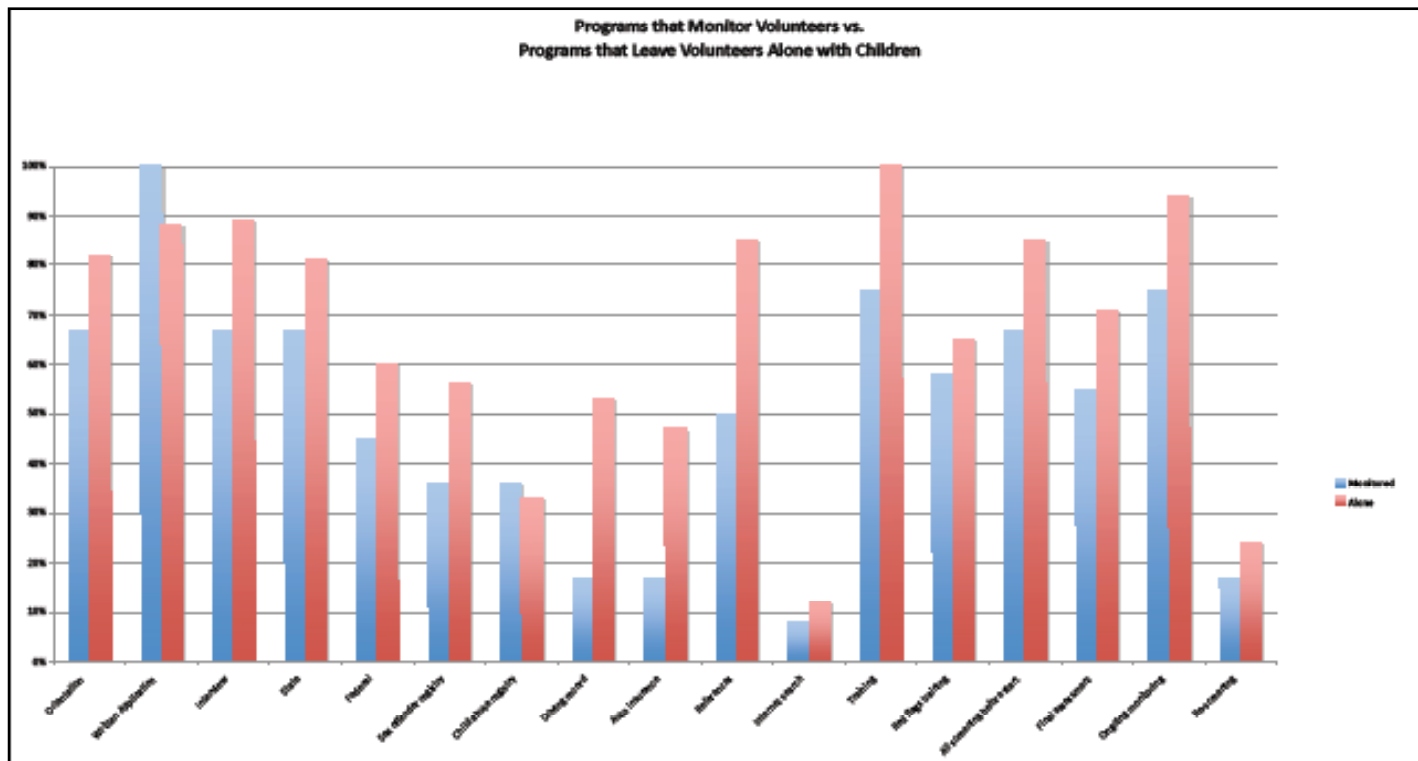


Figure 1: Screening steps used by youth-serving programs in San Mateo County, separated by levels of monitoring while volunteer mentor is with youth.

Figures 1 and 2 indicate that programs not consistently monitoring volunteer mentors with youth use more steps than programs that do. While this is a good sign that programs recognize the importance of screening when choosing an unmonitored volunteer, this may be a risky bet for organizations who have no control over contact outside of the program. Screen as if your program's reputation depends upon it - because, ultimately, it does.



Figure 2a: Summary of number of steps used and not used by youth-serving programs in San Mateo County that consistently monitor volunteer mentors with youth.

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:

- Providing funding for training and to support expanded screening processes for programs.
- Raising awareness of the issue to all agencies and organizations that engage volunteers to work with children.
- Implementing regulations for mandatory screening practices.

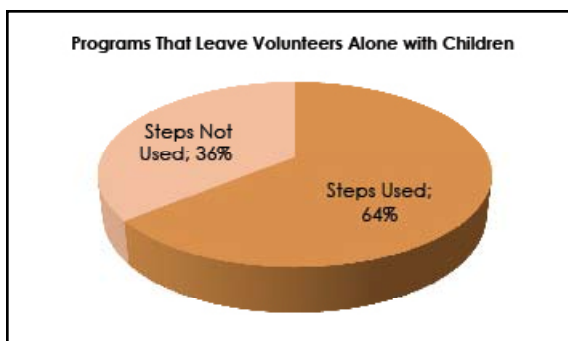


Figure 2b: Summary of number of steps used and not used by youth-serving programs in San Mateo County that do not consistently monitor volunteer mentors with youth.

While there are still no mandated standards for adult volunteers working with children in mentoring and youth-serving organizations, it is encouraging to learn that agencies within our area are taking steps to improve their screening process.

It is also encouraging to learn that “using rigorous approaches to screen and train mentors” is listed as an “evidence-based ‘best practice’” in the *Strengthening Mentoring Opportunities for At-Risk Youth* Policy Brief. Friends for Youth was also singled out for publishing *SAFE (Screening Applicants for Effectiveness): Guidelines to Prevent Child Molestation in Mentoring and Youth-Serving Organizations* as an initiative to promote program quality.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- *Child Welfare Information Gateway* listing of sexual abuse prevention programs and publications: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/programs/types/sexualabuse.cfm>
- *Prevent Child Abuse America* series on Sexual Abuse: <http://pcaamerica.channing-bete.com/> and http://www.preventchildabuse.org/advocacy/downloads/child_sexual_abuse.pdf
- *Kidpower* offers personal safety, confidence, advocacy, and self-protection skills for all ages and abilities: <http://www.kidpower.org>
- *Darkness to Light's Stewards of Children* curriculum, an evidence-based child sexual abuse prevention training program, is the only adult-focused program proven effective in increasing knowledge, improving attitudes and changing participant's child-protective behaviors over the long term: <http://www.darkness2light.org/>
- *Safe Horizon's Hope Shining*, a national initiative to increase awareness, prevention, and support services for children, families, and communities impacted by violence and abuse: http://www.hopeshining.org/learn_signs.php

- *MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership's Elements of Effective Practice* http://www.mentoring.org/find_resources/elements_of_effective_practice/
- *National Mentoring Center/Mentoring Resource Center*, including *The U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Program's Guide to Screening and Background Checks and their Fact Sheet 11: Managing Risk After the Match Is Made* http://www.nwrel.org/mentoring/topic_pubs.php#4

- *Supervision of Children and Teens Never Includes Sex* brochure from the Alliance of Nonprofits for Insurance
- *The Effects of Childhood Stress on Health Across the Lifespan* report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis (For Law Enforcement Officers Investigating the Sexual Exploitation of Children by Acquaintance Molesters)* report from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children
- *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations* report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- *Screening Volunteers to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse: A Community Guide for Youth Organizations* report from the National Collaboration for Youth
- *Who's Lending a Hand? A National Survey of Nonprofit Volunteer Screening Practices* report from The National Center for Victims of Crime
- *More Than a Matter of Trust: Managing the Risks of Mentoring* from the Nonprofit Risk Management Center

Many of these resources are available as free, downloadable PDFs; a few require paying a fee.

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

<http://www.friendsforyouth.org/SAFE.html>

PROVIDING A FRAMEWORK



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