



# we've got you covered

by Gary Benson & Paula Burns

## Building a Screening Program to Lower Your Risk in Ministry

### **If the foundation of your screening program for those working with minors are background checks, you have a potentially failed program!**

What would be your response if someone asked what steps are required before an individual is allowed to work with minors in your church or nonprofit organization?

If your first instinct is to say we require a background check, an alarm should be sounding that perhaps you have taken an unnecessary and potentially damaging shortcut towards an effective screening program.

Consider these things regarding background checks.

- Less than 10% of sexual abusers will encounter the criminal justice system—ever.
- When it comes to picking a background check company, some ministry leaders look for cheap and fast. Unfortunately, this can limit the scope of the information you receive. You need to trust a reputable criminal background screening company that can offer, at a minimum, a “national” background check. Though not fully comprehensive, it’s still the most comprehensive check you can get from a private company. You can add state and local background checks in addition to that if you prefer.
- Background checks need to be an essential part of your screening program—they just cannot be the only screening method you use.

If you’re a typical church, your children’s ministry is usually structured with dedicated rooms, a child check-in system, cameras, limited access, and a predictable schedule and location. Your student ministry, by contrast, is intentionally relaxed to create a more inviting environment, and often involves

attendances at conferences, mission trips, beach and ski trips, retreats, and other activities requiring overnight accommodations and unstructured free time. Add to that the use of electronic communication and social media, which presents countless ways to interact privately with a student.

Consequently, the student ministry makes an attractive target for a sexual abuse offender, and it is where the majority of sexual abuse claims occur. A background check alone will do little to deter this type of activity.

Industry leaders like Richard Hammer from Church Law & Tax Report, and Greg and Kimberly Love with Ministry Safe, lead the way in showing ways to reduce the risk of sexual abuse occurring in your church. Their information should be sought after and learned. In part, you’ll find the following as minimum standards of an effective program.

- **Written Program** — The good news is that you do not need to have an exhaustive program, but you do need an established written program — one that is understood by all staff and workers and, most importantly, adhered to. Samples can be found on our website.
- **Application** — Besides gathering basic applicant information, an application is a chance to discover any red flags that should be further investigated and can provide needed supplemental information such as a background check release. Sample applications can be found on our website.
- **Interview** — Interview all applicants for youth and children’s ministry. Such face-to-face interactions can help the church best understand the person’s suitability for the position under consideration.



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- **Waiting Period** — Restrict anyone from working with minors for an established period, such as six months. This not only allows you the opportunity to better know the applicant, but it will also repel persons seeking immediate access to potential victims.
- **Two-Adult or Never Alone Rule** — If adhered to, this one step could drastically change the number of sexual abuse claims or even allegations of the same. Require that no adult is ever alone with a minor. This may involve some changes in the way you've previously operated. Remember this one thought when interacting with a minor — Who is your witness?
- **Background Check** — As previously noted, these are essential — they just cannot be the only thing you do. Background checks are inexpensive and convenient. We have multiple resources on our website for background checks at negotiated pricing.
- **Training** — Often overlooked and minimized in terms of its importance, ongoing training is essential to learning the risks and being reminded of them. There are several excellent

online training opportunities. Ministry Safe is a leader in this area, and we have a dedicated page to this organization and its training opportunities noted on our website.

If you have any questions, if you'd like us to review the policy and procedures in place for your organization, or if you need more information, please do not hesitate to reach out to us. It's not about insurance, it's about protecting your ministry. ✦



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