



10 Things Churches & Ministries Need to Know Before Selecting a Background Screening Firm

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Choosing a reputable and proven background screening firm is one of the most critical business decisions you will make for your church or ministry. Unfortunately, the background screening industry has made this a more convoluted selection process by being less than transparent about best practices.

Volunteer screening is still widely unregulated and that has resulted in screening firms offering the low-level screenings, extremely low prices, and a focus on speed instead of quality. This has created two levels of risk for churches and ministries:

1. Federal FCRA compliance (explained later); and
2. Likelihood of missing records on sexual predators.

Most states have NO mandated requirements for starting a background screening firm. Anybody can start one.

The efficient use of technology can drive down costs AND shorten the turnaround time. When screening companies purport to complete background checks not in days, but in minutes, you should take pause. Quality criminal history checks require a larger approach.

Yes, more and more court records are becoming automated and readily accessible. However, many courts still necessitate a court researcher to do the job correctly. In certain regions of the U.S., clerks are required to do the search. Sometimes, when a county has upper and lower courts that are not connected, each must be searched separately. In addition, some courts still utilize paper records versus electronic copies.

When I read that a screening company is completing a background check in minutes, it leads me to conclude that they are relying on databases and they are neglecting to search courts directly. Data dumping criminal history reports is not providing up-to-date data from the counties that require a county clerk to conduct the search. Instant searches are notorious for not providing accurate and up-to-date data as well as failure to find alias/identity information.

Background screening is a risk-management solution. This should not be a process that allows you to check a box and claim you have done your due diligence. Poor screening policies can foster complaints of negligent hiring and negligent retention (yes for volunteers) as well as give rise to a proliferation of federal lawsuits related to federal Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) violations.

Many of today's background screening firms have placed profit above education. The following questions can help you navigate the selection process.



1. **How do you define a background check?** There is no standard definition; however, background screening relies heavily on incomplete public record sources. A thorough background screening program should consist of multiple checks and balances that include identification, multi-state databases, county criminal searches and federal court searches. **A reputable screening firm will define a background check as containing multiple solutions for a checks and balance against missing data.**
2. **Is the background check instant?** There is no such thing as a single-source instant database search. If a background check is “instant” and uses only a single source, then it is a database only search. There is no single database, not even the FBI’s NCIC, that is comprehensive enough to stand as a single-source screening program. Using only a database for employment purposes can open up federal Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) violation issues. Volunteers are increasingly interpreted as falling under the FCRA which means there are further requirements on ensuring information is complete and up to date.
3. **Cost of a background check?** Quality background checks cost more than \$5. Cost alone does not determine if the background check is comprehensive. Many volunteer screening firms sell a single-source database search for as little as \$5. However, a comprehensive background check **must** contain multiple checks and balances. Generally, the cost will be closer to \$10-\$25, depending on what searches are in the package. **Look at what is included in the package. Many screening firms will list the pieces of a national criminal search separately to provide a sense of a multi-purpose search. If the package is listed as SSN, National or Multi-State Database, National Sex Offender and Terrorist Watchlists, this is a single-source database in most instances.**

Always Read the fine print carefully. Many screening firms do not clearly articulate all the hidden costs e.g. alias names (other names, former married names, legal name changes), additional counties, expanded past 7 years, etc.
4. **How far back do your background check reports go?** A thorough background check should go back as far as allowed by law. We believe it is critical for our clients to have all the information they need to make informed decisions. Even so, there are strict guidelines from the EEOC, FCRA and state and local laws that must be followed. What are factors that can impact how far back a background check extends?
 - a. **Convictions vs Non-Convictions.** The federal FCRA restricts reporting of non-convictions to no more than 7 years unless the salary for the position is \$75,000 or more. Some state laws further restrict convictions or do not allow their reporting.
 - b. **Individual State.** Several states have further restricted the reporting of adverse information.



- c. **How Far Back Court Records are Available?** Some states maintain criminal records that extend 30 years or more. Other states purge misdemeanor records at 10 years.
5. **How are alias names searched?** Alias names bring up thoughts of Jason Bourne and espionage, but really, it is a fancy way of saying any other name your candidate has been known by. With name-based background checks, it is critical to include any possible alias names to ensure your candidates do not have a criminal history under a former married name, maiden name, birth name, etc. Many screening firms do not include this service in their pricing and then, clients are unpleasantly surprised when hit with additional fees because a candidate has 3 different names. **We do not charge extra for searching other names. We consider it an important part of a comprehensive search (except in the handful of counties that require a court access fee).**
6. **Are employees of the screening firms screened regularly?** It seems like a question you would not need to ask, but I would encourage you to inquire about the backgrounds of the people you will be trusting with such sensitive information. Some screening company's "offshore" parts of their screening process like verifications.

How do you ensure that the sensitive PII on your employees, vendors, volunteers are not being sent to another country with little to no quality control?

Case study: One of our large international volunteer partners told me that several of their affiliates were adamant about using a specific local background screening company. A quick internet search by our partner revealed that the screening firm operated from home, where the owner also sold jams and jellies. This was not the secure environment they had hoped for. **Our employees are re-screened annually as well as continuous arrest monitoring.**

7. **Security of Data.** We mentioned in #6 that some screening firm's "offshore" data which creates security issues for how the data is transferred. More importantly, what happens to it on the other end where it could be taken, printed, sold, etc.? Security is a huge concern with all of our data, and you can be confident that our screening firm uses industry "best practices" for securing your data both in transit and at rest. This simply means secured connections when submitting data and how the data is managed in the database, data centers etc.
8. **Is compliance a core mission?** Complying with federal laws such as the FCRA, DPPA and EEOC should be part of the core mission of any screening firm. However, the majority of compliance is incumbent upon the end user. Select a screening partner that understands the myriad of laws AND is committed to keeping you abreast of changes and



what is happening in the industry. We provide many educational opportunities each month i.e. live training events, live webinars, articles, and email communications. **If you enter information and the results come back to you instantly, without a screening firm reviewing, then compliancy is not a core competency or commitment.**

9. **Customer service.** Yes, everybody claims to have it but very few organizations truly do. When you have a question about a background check, do you have easy access to your screening company to get your questions answered? Service is our core foundation. We have a VP of Client Advocacy who leads a team with dedicated toll-free numbers, direct lines, direct email, and live chat during business hours.

10. **Instant Check with Verification.** This has become a standard in the church/ ministry background screening space. The screening firm will offer a cheap national database search and add verification of any criminal records, or even label as a re-verification check. This is marketing. Missing data in these searches still places your church/ ministry at risk. **The inherent problem with a single-source database check is that the data is not complete. Verifying a record does not compensate for missing data.**

In summary, a background screening firm should be more than willing to answer these questions. If they are not, move one. There are numerous screening firms that will. You do not want to place the safety and security of your background screening process in the hands of an organization that is cutting corners or providing low quality products or services. If a company won't take the time to answer your questions in order to win your business, how responsive will they be when you are a client?

Please give us a call or an email, we are glad to answer any questions you have: 866-434-0002 or sales@safehiringsolutions.com