

# As Sex Abuse Scandals Flood the Church, Here's How Pastors Can Protect Their Flocks

The last several years have been challenging for churches in America. The national news accounts of sexual abuse by ministers and volunteers across several denominations have put the spotlight on the challenge churches face in keeping the most vulnerable of their congregations safe.

Unfortunately, churches are a soft target for criminals of all bents, whether they be predators, scam artists or thieves. Fortunately, there are many ways churches can prevent bad actors from infiltrating their organizations. It only requires (even the smallest) churches to be disciplined in every aspect of security. While churches have taken this crisis seriously—with background checks increasing by 12% over the last year—there are still issues. One area where churches struggle is in ordering the correct staff and volunteer background screens.

Recently, Protect My Ministry (PMM), a Ministry Brands company, performed an audit of nearly 30,000 clients to determine if churches were ordering the correct type of screen given the company's recommendation for their location. It was determined that 40% of churches nationally were ordering the wrong screening product, potentially putting the church at risk. Most often, screens were ordered based on price, rather than the recommended product. Additionally, it was determined that less than 10% of churches ordered rescreens of their staff and volunteers annually. That means more than 90% of churches were rescreening at best every 2-3 years, and at worst only utilizing the initial screen.

Background screening employees and volunteers is one of the most effective tools to keep congregations safe. Why then are so many ministries making major mistakes when implementing them? One of the key factors is church staff are not familiar with the difference between background screens. Background checks are inherently confusing for several reasons; for starters, the scope of information churches try to access, the similarity between different screens and the difference in state reporting quality all contribute to the complexity of determining which screen to purchase. It's easy to think that a background screen is just another background screen.

For example, a quality simple screen would utilize a Social Security Number (SSN) to search the credit bureaus for previous addresses as well as alias names. The SSN search validates the SSN that an applicant provides and is vital to verifying the identity of an individual, alias names and any previous addresses. All alias names found are searched on the national database and sex offender registries, in addition to the applicant name provided. Why would this not be enough information? The critical issue is that a national search cannot be trusted as a stand-alone service in every state due to the limitations of the data being queried.

While a review of the National Criminal and Sex Offender databases would seem to be comprehensive in nature, that is not always the case. The term "national database" is inadequate in that the search does not cover all the United States, but it does integrate 1,800 databases covering approximately 900 million records. The patchwork of local, county and state databases are not all interconnected and are not all updated in real time. Many states still struggle to properly aggregate data and report it up to these national databases. In those instances, a search of the National Criminal Database without a county-level or state-wide search would be insufficient. Typically, the county and state-wide searches are part of a premium product and are slightly

costlier because they are more comprehensive and therefore more time consuming. They may have county-imposed fees included, require background check companies to dig deeper and at times even physically go to the courthouse to review records.

If that's the case, why are simple checks even offered to churches? In some states and situations, the simple screen is comprehensive enough to be utilized by the church. In Texas, for instance, the state-wide reporting system aggregates and reports all criminal conviction data to the national database every 30 days, making a simple screen credible. On the other hand, while the state of Florida does technically have a state repository (Administrative Office of the Courts), they do not update it regularly and don't include all necessary date of birth information required to consider it a quality source. The best option in that state then, would be to order a more detailed screen, but even then, it's not that simple.

An example would be if a volunteer in Texas had previously been convicted of a felony domestic assault in Alabama, disqualifying them from volunteering at their church. While it may be okay to use a simple screen in Texas, it would have missed the offense in Alabama because it may not have been aggregated to the National Criminal Database. In this case, running a premium screen would have been more prudent. It would have identified a previous residency in another state and queried that state and county for previous offenses.

The same issues arise for not regularly rescreening staff and volunteers. Remember, not all arrests make the evening news. If a nursery volunteer was convicted of misdemeanor indecent exposure or some other salacious crime, and a rescreen was never run, children and the church could all be at risk. Many of the nation's largest churches, like Prestonwood Baptist in Dallas, Texas, rescreen all their staff and volunteers annually. This, coupled with strict security policies for staff and volunteers who work with young adults and children,

make up an important multi-layer system of security that works to catch bad actors before they act.

What often gets churches in trouble is the lack of understanding and the temptation to go with a cheaper option. Being good stewards of the church budget is always a chief priority, but this may tempt many churches to accept the lowest bid by a screening firm who promises "instant results." Beware of instances where something sounds too good to be true. Know that a background screen is not always just a background screen. Work with a reputable NAPBS accredited organization, and partner with them to ensure you are always ordering the right product for your church. The first step to prudent church security starts with running the right background check and running it annually. {eo}

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