



# Police checks and volunteers

*While every effort has been made to obtain the most current and accurate information about background checks (police checks and working with children checks) in Australian states and territories, policies and practices around background checks can change. Volunteering Australia does not accept responsibility for the accuracy of the following information. Volunteering Australia recommends volunteers and organisations contact their local state police force or state volunteering centre for the most up to date information about police checks and working with children checks in their state. This information sheet was current as at September 4 2006.*

**See also Volunteering Australia information sheets:**

- *Screening and the volunteer recruitment process*
- *100 point identification check*

Criminal records checks are increasingly being used to aid the task of screening volunteers for suitability for volunteer roles, particularly where volunteers work with children or other vulnerable clients, or where they have financial or driving responsibilities.

The types of checks that are required for volunteers, or are available for use as a screening tool, will depend on which state your organisation operates in. The systems in place in each state are outlined in this information sheet.

## Types of background checks

### Police checks

Criminal records checks are often referred to as police checks, national name checks or national police certificates. Once a police check has been requested for a volunteer or applicant, their name will usually be checked against all criminal records in Australia. In some states and territories it is possible request a check for criminal records in the home state only.

Convictions that are 'unspent' will be highlighted by a police check. Some, usually less serious offences, will no longer appear on police checks after a number of years have passed. These expired convictions are referred to as 'spent' convictions. Your state police service can advise you about spent and unspent convictions in your state or territory.

Police checks are not transferable between organisations.

Organisations sometimes conduct police checks on volunteers for the following reasons:

- Funding requirement. Some government departments require volunteers to undergo police checks to satisfy conditions for funding organisations.
- Duty of care. Organisations need to do all that is reasonable to avoid harm to clients, volunteers and the organisation. Failure to do so results in liability for any harm. Risks to organisations that might be best managed through incorporating police checks include potential for abuse of vulnerable clients and risks associated volunteers having financial or driving responsibilities.

Police checks should be initiated by organisations rather than individuals to ensure the greatest level of accuracy and assurance. The first points of contact are usually local police stations.

### **Working with children checks**

In some states, certain volunteers who work with children are required by law in some states to undergo background checks.

Unlike police checks, which screen for all unspent convictions, working with children checks look for relevant offences that indicate unsuitability for work with children. These generally include, but are not limited to, crimes of a violent or sexual nature against children. In addition to checking criminal records, working with children checks may include checks against sex offender registers and may search for adverse findings on professional disciplinary registers.

The other major difference between police checks and working with children checks is that working with children checks are designed to be transferable between organisations within the same state. These checks are valid for a number of years.

The operation of working with children checks varies between states so it is important to learn about how the system operates in your state if your organisation works in a state that has a system of working with children checks.

## **Why is volunteer screening and risk management still important?**

There are several reasons why organisations should implement a broad pre-recruitment volunteer screening process, rather than relying on police checks or working with children checks alone to screen out unsuitable applicants.

Both police checks and working with children checks have limitations in their ability to protect children and manage a variety of risks within organisations.

### **Police checks**

- Only people with current convictions are identified. Offenders who are not convicted of crimes will not be identified.
- Police checks only include convictions up to the date of issue – even cases presently before courts will not be included.
- Accuracy is not assured. A misspelt or incorrect name may result in an incorrect check.

(Organisations can use the 100 point identification schedule to verify the applicants' identity - see Volunteering Australia information sheet 100 point identification check)

### **Working with children checks**

- Only individuals with a relevant conviction, pending charge or selected other findings will be highlighted by working with children checks. Because abuse of children can go undetected, working with children checks do not guarantee the suitability of individuals for work with children.
- Exemptions apply to some volunteers and so they are not subject to the same level of scrutiny as other volunteers.
- Working with children checks do not screen for all criminal records, they only screen for offences indicating unsuitability for work with children. These offences may vary between states.

For more information about comprehensive pre-recruitment screening, see Volunteering Australia's information sheet *Screening and the volunteer recruitment process*.

## What about volunteers from other countries?

Currently there are no formal means by which to obtain police checks for foreign volunteers. Organisations involving overseas volunteers should manage potential risks to their clients or organisation by utilising a broad pre-recruitment screening process in the absence of police checks.

Occasionally volunteers are able to provide police checks obtained in their country of origin.

## What about when I want to volunteer overseas?

If you plan to volunteer overseas you can obtain a national police certificate from the Australian Federal Police (AFP). You can obtain this before you leave Australia or request it from overseas.

COST: \$36

PROCESSING TIME: Approximately 15 working days

It is advisable to obtain police checks as close as possible to your date of departure.

## What happens in my state or territory?

### Australian Capital Territory

National police certificates can be accessed from the Australian Federal Police (AFP).

COST: \$36

PROCESSING TIME: Approximately 15 working days

### New South Wales

Police checks are generally not available to volunteers in New South Wales.

Both national police records checks and a system of working with children checks operate for the purpose of screening paid employees in New South Wales.

Organisations working with vulnerable populations will need to carefully consider their risk management and pre-recruitment screening of volunteers in the absence of criminal records checks being available for volunteers.

### Northern Territory

- National check

COST: A discounted volunteer rate of \$5 will be charged if the request for a police check is accompanied by a letter (on an organisational letterhead), from the volunteer-involving not for profit organisation, which states the name of the volunteer and requests the discounted rate.

PROCESSING TIME: Up to 15 working days

## Queensland

Organisations who wish to include police checks in their risk management strategies can access police checks from the Queensland Police Service.

- National police certificates

COST: \$40.25

PROCESSING TIME: Up to 4 weeks

- 'Working with Children Check'

Criminal records checks are mandatory in Queensland for many volunteers working with children. The system is administered by the Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian. These checks are commonly referred to as the 'blue card' because of the card issued to volunteers. Blue cards are valid for two years and, like other working with children checks, can be transferred between organisations.

There are some exceptions to the mandatory requirement for checking. For example, some exemptions apply to parents volunteering at their children's school. Organisations should consult the Commissioner for Young People and Child Guardian if they are in doubt as to whether a check is required. Information is available from The Commissioner's website [www.childcomm.qld.gov.au](http://www.childcomm.qld.gov.au) or by calling 1800 688 275.

COST: Free

PROCESSING TIME: Approximately 6 – 8 weeks

## South Australia

- National police certificates are available from the South Australian Police. Some organisations who work with vulnerable groups such as children, the aged, or disabled people, can access free police checks for volunteers. A range of criteria need to be met to be eligible for these checks.

COST: Free for volunteers working with registered organisations who work with vulnerable groups. \$29.50 for other volunteers

PROCESSING TIME: Up to 15 working days

## Tasmania

Two types of checks are available from the Tasmania Police:

- Tasmania only (can be accessed every 12 months)

COST: Free

PROCESSING TIME: Up to 10 working days

- National Police Certificates

COST: \$5 for registered organisations

PROCESSING TIME: Up to 15 working days

Organisations wishing to obtain the \$5 volunteer rate for national police certificates will need to register with the Tasmania Police.

Moves are underway in Tasmania to develop a system of working with children checks for people who undertake volunteer work with children. To find out up to date information on the development of this system contact Tasmania's Commissioner for Children on (03) 6233 4520 or visit [www.childcomm.tas.gov.au](http://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au).

## Victoria

Police checks are available from the Victoria Police. Organisations wishing to obtain a discounted volunteer rate will need to register with the Victoria Police.

- National Police Certificates

COST: \$13.30 for registered organisations

PROCESSING TIME: Approximately 10 working days

- Working with Children Checks

COST: Free

PROCESSING TIME: Approximately 4 - 8 weeks

A system of working with children checks is currently being introduced in Victoria for many volunteers who work with children. To find out if you or volunteers in your organisation will require these check or establish when checks in your industry commence, contact the Working With Children Check Unit on 1300 652 879 or visit [www.justice.vic.gov.au](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au).

## Western Australia

- The Western Australia Volunteering Secretariat provides national checks for approved not-for-profit organisations and their volunteers.

COST: \$9.50

PROCESSING TIME: Approximately 10 working days

These checks indicate whether a persons record contains a conviction or not, without detailing the conviction. If a conviction is found, it is usually appropriate to access a national police certificate to establish further details.

- National police certificates can be obtained through the Western Australia Police. Where a conviction is present this check outlines the details of the conviction.

COST: \$43

PROCESSING TIME: Approximately 10 working days

- Working with Children Checks

The Western Australia government is phasing in a system of working with children checks in 2006. This system will require many volunteers who work with children to undergo a background check. The checks will be available from a screening unit operating within the Western Australia Department for Community Development.

COST: \$10

PROCESSING TIME: Approximately 6 weeks

To find out if you or volunteers in your organisation will require these check or establish when checks in your industry commence, visit [www.checkwwc.wa.gov.au](http://www.checkwwc.wa.gov.au) or call 1800 883 979.

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