

PROTECTING YOUNG ATHLETES From Predators

By Marcia Bradford - Reprinted with permission from *SportsEvents Magazine*

During the past year, shocking stories that youth athletes were secretly videotaped in locker room showers or coerced into sexual activities with adult coaches have made the headlines and refocused many sports organizations on the vital importance of protecting children from abuse.

While these types of events are, unfortunately, not new, and predatory behavior is certainly not limited to sports activities, recent incidents serve as important reminders that the safety of children who participate in sports has to be the top priority for all sports

membership,” Johnson said. “Child abuse is by no means confined to sports, yet, unfortunately, in any program where adults supervise children there exists an obvious opportunity for sexual predators, and youth programs are known targets for perpetrators of these crimes.”

To protect children to the extent possible, sports organizations should screen volunteers and staff using technological advancements that make criminal histories available and offer rapid up-to-date checks on a regular basis, Johnson said. Among those who should be screened are individuals who have regular contact with youth participants, have authority or supervision over

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organizations, according to Sally Johnson, executive director of the National Council of Youth Sports (NCYS).

“In light of recent media articles detailing some horrendous situations of adult coaches abusing young athletes, many sports organizations are reviewing and/or tweaking their policies regarding background checks and other safety measures,” Johnson said. “These incidents have once again raised consciousness about the need to be vigilant in protecting our children.”

NCYS, representing more than 180 organizations and 52 million young athletes, began a national movement in 2002 aimed at eradicating criminal behavior in sports organizations as well as general society. After taking concerns about child safety to the U.S. Congress and working with the FBI and the insurance industry, NCYS co-founded the National Center for Safety Initiatives (NCSI) in 2005 to provide background-screening services dedicated specifically to the needs of youth-serving organizations.

“Honestly, background checks are one of the most important services the NCYS has ever offered to its

youth, have an opportunity to establish a position of trust with youth, and have an opportunity for one-on-one contact, she said.

A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

NCSI was created to provide a standard, comprehensive approach for screening volunteers, Johnson said. Earlier safety programs, focused on fingerprinting, were expensive and time-consuming. Using vendors that provided lists of named sex offenders was also problematic because lists were sometimes out-of-date, she said. Additionally, sports organization staffs were often unsure how to interpret the records or concerned about legal ramifications of taking action against an individual on the list.

Today, NCSI is the only national background screening service that applies NCYS-recommended guidelines, focusing on seven identified risk factors and using multiple vendors to ensure due diligence, according to Johnson. Searches conducted by NCSI include identity verification, using Social Security

Number Verification/Trace reports; national criminal database searches, updated regularly; terrorist database searches; and Sex Offender Registry searches of all available states (presently 49, plus D.C., Guam and Puerto Rico). Additionally, most of NCSI's programs include at least one county search that generally covers the longest and most recent residency in the past five years.

Additional search components include county and federal court searches and motor vehicle records. NCSI's standard search protocol looks for criminal convictions, including felonies, lesser crimes of a sexual nature, lesser crimes involving force/threat of force, lesser crimes involving controlled substances (generally not paraphernalia or alcohol), and crimes involving cruelty to animals. When a background search reveals that a person has been convicted of any crimes listed above or is a registered sex offender, that person is given a "red light" and has the chance to challenge the accuracy of the information, which remains confidential.

According to Trish McGonnell, NCSI co-founder, president and CEO, NCSI has conducted thousands of criminal background checks since 2005 and has issued red lights on convictions for crimes as serious as rape and attempted rape, manslaughter, lewd acts on a child, armed robbery, unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor, sodomy, murder, mayhem, manufacture/distribution of controlled substances, embezzlement, forgery, assault with a deadly weapon and battery.

"Sadly, this is an issue that has been with us as long as mankind has existed," McGonnell said. "Statistics regarding the numbers of children who will experience some type of sexual abuse are very compelling; some

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50 percent of these incidents occur outside the home and 90 percent of the abusers are known and often trusted by the victims. This makes it evident that all types of organizations that offer services to kids—from community centers to faith-based groups to sports organizations—and all other places that kids go because we believe them to be trusted environments, can in fact be places where kids are at risk for abuse.

"It's important to point out that it's not the organizations that are creating the problem," she added. However, it is a problem that we as a society share, and the people who work with these organizations have a responsibility to try and prevent situations where abuse can occur. Our goal is to take steps to eliminate or reduce any incidents from happening at these institutions, to assist organizations in their efforts to prevent abuse of children, and to provide tools that can produce results."

CONSISTENT STANDARDS

Jeff Breidenbach, director of planning for the United States Bowling Congress (USBC), said his organization has always taken the role of protecting children very seriously. Since 2006, its registered volunteer program (RVP) has required all those who work or have contact with USBC bowlers go through the NCSI screening process. As a result, more than 200 "red light" individuals have been identified and barred from working with USBC, according to organizational records.

"We are pleased to have been one of the first youth sports programs to have offered this type of program," he said. "In 2006, we began phasing it in, and now all of our associations use it. More than 15,000 coaches and other volunteers have gone through the program. Our experience has shown that this process works because it applies standard, established criteria, from sport to sport and state to state."

Breidenbach added that USBC hopes to eventually eliminate all child abusers not just from bowling but from all sports programs. "The experts tell us that sexual predators tend to move from sport to sport and community to community, so the more organizations that take part in the screening process, the better our chances are of eliminating these people entirely," he said.

Pointing out that "child abuse, sexual misconduct and domestic violence are insidious crimes committed by people who often look and act normal," the USBC code of conduct states that "the only practical way to make youth bowling safe is to identify those who refuse to abide by acceptable standards of behavior, remove them

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from contact with our young people, and establish barriers to prevent other predators from gaining access.”

As part of this effort, volunteers who are approved through the background checks are given badges that must be worn at all USBC events, Breidenbach said. “These offer a visible symbol of assurance to parents and others involved that these people, who work with the children, have passed the background screening process.”

AN EFFECTIVE DETERRENT

Steve Penny, CEO of USA Gymnastics, pointed out that NCSI background checks serve as a very effective deterrent to criminals who might seek to become involved in youth sports programs.

“The reality is that most people involved in sports organizations are really good people,” he said “But when people know they must submit to a

do everything possible to prevent an abuser from having access to the children, but you have to take responsibility in an ongoing way, and that means zero tolerance if and when anything does go wrong. The most effective way to achieve this is to have strong written policies in place.”

She added that organizations need to create an environment that prevents these types of incidents but also develop a system for dealing with a situation when something goes wrong.

“They need to make parents and others aware of the signs to watch for,” McGonnell said.

It is important to have comprehensive risk management policies in place, as well as having clearly established lines of communication, Johnson advised.

“Reference checking is another important source of information, including previous clubs/teams or athletes with whom the individual has worked. Ask specific questions about the individual’s behaviors

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background check before being able to participate in our organization, we are much less likely to have sex offenders or people with criminal backgrounds try to get involved.”

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BEYOND SCREENING

McGonnell said that background screening is just one element in what should be an overall call to action by parents and heads of youth organizations.

“We need to create a culture where there is zero opportunity and zero tolerance for any type of sexual or physical abuse,” she said. “To approach zero opportunity, you start with background checks and

and whether anyone has reported any inappropriate behavior(s) that might be of concern to you. Also work with your insurance provider to help maintain a safe environment,” Johnson said.

The bar for protecting children must continually be raised, McGonnell said, in light of recent reports of abuse. “This is a call to action for everyone, especially parents, who need to talk with their kids and keep the lines of communication open,” she stressed. “It’s also an opportunity for organizations to be more open about their cultures, to talk with parents and volunteers about expectations. We are continually looking at our program to make sure we are doing it right, to work on areas that address the unique needs of specific organizations, and to make sure we are doing all we can to protect children.” ✕