

Obstacle or Opportunity

By: **Joe Abel**, Director of Leisure Services Seminole County, Florida,
Past President FRPA, Past Member, Board of Directors, NRPA

"Never confuse movement with action." Ernest Hemingway

You've heard it before, Perception IS reality. As professionals in parks, recreation, and conservation, we have a perception problem that requires deliberate and immediate *action*.

People born between 1946 and 1964 are all part of the Baby Boom generation. This was a time that many clearly remember growing up in their neighborhood park or open space creating games and playing with friends until the street light came on signaling the time to come home. Parents knew where their kids were and trusted that with the exception of an occasional cut, bump, or bruise, they were safe. When the time came for the "boomers" to raise their families, investing in parks, playgrounds, and programs was a no brainer. A Levy for park land acquisition and expansion of recreation services was rarely defeated. This generation collectively recognized the positive contribution parks had on their childhood as a safe place to have fun, build friendships and to just be a kid.

Along with the reputation of the local school system, parks and recreation facilities factored into the decision where "boomers" would decide to establish roots and raise their children. Since September 11, 2001 there is a broad and growing perception among the general public that parks, playgrounds, and programs present safety risks that go way beyond cuts, bumps, and bruises. Parents have become extremely protective and rightfully so. When a child expresses an interest to go to the park, or to participate in a program, the parent thoughtfully considers if they will be able to carve out the time required to be there to watch over them. Missy Poirier, a mom in South Florida, says she doesn't stray too far away from her 6-year-old daughter when she participates in soccer, cheerleading, golf, and tennis. "We stay there, we like to know what's going on," Poirier said. "You don't know who your kids are going to be left with."

Adding to the assault on our vocation are unsubstantiated rumors and dreadful headlines that appear far too often indicting parks and programs as an accomplice in wrongful behavior. Personal safety concerns have park facilities and programs that were once perceived as a community asset to be devalued as a liability of questionable worth. This provides our profession with an enormous opportunity to unite with purpose and tenacity under the umbrella of the National Recreation and Park Association to change this perception. If you are not a member, consider this. With 24,000 members representing 4,000 communities we have the combined influence to fortify our place of importance and value among all community services when we do our part to make our communities safe.

"May our adversities make us strong, our victories make us wise, and our actions make us proud." H. Brown

I challenge every park, recreation, and conservation professional to accept the duty and responsibility by taking the initial steps in the NRPA mission,
To provide a consistent approach to background screening in all 50 states through the NRPA Recommended Guidelines for Credentialing.

http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/Discover_NRPA/Join_NRPA/Member_Benefits/NRPA%20recommended%20guidelines%20final.pdf

The skillful, forward thinking and proficient NRPA staff has equipped our membership with the tools and procedures necessary to take immediate action to accomplish this mission. Our professional association has the plan in place to restore the confidence of the general public. NRPA has provided each of us with the opportunity to demonstrate that as the gate keepers of community parks and programs we are doing everything in our collective power to overcome any doubt that the personal safety of our visitors and participants is integral to our objectives.

"NRPA is deeply committed to supporting you as you provide essential services to the people of your communities". Barbara Tulipane, CAE, NRPA Chief Executive Officer

NRPA Has Set the Bar for Background Checks

Hard lessons learned demonstrate that not every person who is willing to serve as a volunteer or paid staff should be provided this opportunity. In response, NRPA created the **Recommended Guidelines for Credentialing** outlining the best practices in conducting a comprehensive national criminal background check for park, recreation, and conservation agencies.

After ten years of surveys, focus groups, staff research, debate and study, it became quite evident to the NRPA staff help was needed. Due to the highly technical and complex nature of the various screening methods, the time had come to reach out for assistance from professionals in the field of conducting screening and criminal background checks. So, early in 2004, NRPA researched professional firms to find the best fit in providing the required technical assistance. In 2005 Southeastern Security Consultants, Inc (SSCI) was selected to provide technical support necessary to compose a guideline for NRPA staff to present for ratification.

The next obvious question was will the NRPA Recommended Guidelines meet the standards of due diligent employment screening and the scrutiny of attorneys who provide legal opinions to public entities from different states? The answer is the NRPA guideline has been reviewed and approved by over 300 city and county attorneys.

A very early adopter in November 2006 was the City of Tukwila, Washington. Volunteer and Special Event Superintendent Tracy Gallaway said "I sleep better at night much more

confident in the extensiveness of the background check results we receive due to the NRPA guidelines than those we were getting from the state-only check.”

From 2007 – 2009, there were 25,606 background checks conducted for NRPA members by SSCI following the Recommended Guidelines. Even though every person consented to the background check, a stunning **1,010** had something in their background that disqualified them from public service. This data has illuminated what many of us have feared. Statistically there are an additional **868,000** people potentially infiltrating the current paid and unpaid workforce that should never be granted the privilege of working with our most vulnerable populations.

Another revealing statistic is that 13% of those disqualified from 2007-2009 had committed their offense *outside* their state of current residence. A “State Only” check would have allowed them to fall through the crack. Park Director Jerry Hover with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks said, “This past year we used NRPA Operation TLC² and got about a 4% hit rate of bad people--which really says our supervisors do a good job of selecting candidates because the hit rate is much higher nationally--but we would have missed 170 bad people and put them out with children and put our visitors and agency at risk! Right now with the high unemployment and economy many bad people are taking advantage and wanting to be park hosts or playground assistants or trail volunteers. I urge other states to check it out.”

There are two primary and court tested methods of verifying an applicant’s identity for the purpose of employment screening: collecting fingerprints and tracing social security numbers. While the common assumption is that fingerprinting is the fail safe method, after exhaustive study of both methods, the NRPA concludes that the best outcome for the profession of parks, recreation, and conservation is through the social security trace with added steps that would maximize effectiveness and reduce errors.

Fingerprinting gives only a partial story behind someone’s background. There are a number of serious misdemeanors and other disqualifying offenses that result in many police jurisdictions issuing only a citation to appear in court to address the charges. Because the offender was not jailed, no fingerprints were taken! However, utilizing a social security number trace coupled with a county courthouse search (non fingerprint) reveals these offenses and case outcomes including charges, court dispositions, and sentencing. All this information is essential to determine if the individual qualifies to be appointed as paid or unpaid staff. “We were using the State of Washington fingerprint check and have since found the NRPA check through SSCI is much quicker, more thorough, easier to use and a much better alternative for us” said Angela Stuefen, Human Resources Analyst for Metroparks Tacoma,

The background check system provided by NRPA allows us to implement a consistent approach to screening among all parks, recreation, and conservation professionals. It is one of our undisputed duties to ensure staff and volunteers are validated as respectable, law abiding people with nothing in their background anywhere in any state that would pose a threat or present a risk. We are proud to be one of 150 agencies in 39 states (at press time)

that are active participants in this critical NRPA mission and firmly believe in the NRPA Recommended Guidelines for Credentialing. Anything short of these Recommended Guidelines may be good but not good enough in some court jurisdictions.

The bar has been raised for screening in the field of parks, recreation, and conservation. The NRPA Recommended Guidelines are now the benchmark and meet the CAPRA standards for agency accreditation.

Our national professional association has done all the legwork to boldly provide us the **Opportunity** to implement a consistent, effective, and affordable approach to background screening in all 50 states, and applied the legal due diligence required to shed the **Obstacles**.

For more information visit www.nrpa.org/tlc2



Article Side Bar: (permission to use LOGO JPG file above granted)

NRPA OPERATION TLC² (Totally Livable Communities through Tender Loving Care)

MAKING COMMUNITIES SAFE Is the National Recreation and Park Association's volunteer management and background screening program designed to ensure that your agency attains the best, most qualified staff and volunteers to support the safety and quality of life in your community. To take advantage of this member benefit, visit the NRPA Store at www.nrpa.org.

With NRPA **Operation TLC² Making Communities Safe**, participating agencies receive:

- The Safe Tool Kit - **FREE** for NRPA members (with 50 prepaid background checks). Non-members may purchase the Tool Kit for \$995.
- Background checks at a **preferred price of \$18.50 each**, which includes all full time, part time, seasonal staff, and volunteers, and is extended to all the other departments/divisions as well as all youth leagues, tutors, mentors, and groups authorized to use the public facilities under the control of the agency.
- Access to purchase Operation TLC² Online Training.

For more information, contact NRPA at 703-858-2153

For Magazine Artwork - A Collage of REAL News Headlines:

Cheerleader coach accused of sexual abuse had two prior criminal convictions

A Ticking Time Bomb Unscreened Volunteers

Some ex-cons are banned from volunteering to help kids' on the ball field

**SIDELINED BY THEIR PAST;
Some ex-cons are banned from volunteering to help kids on the ball field**

Volunteer Coach with Criminal Record Arrested Again

Volunteers Paying for Background Checks

A Call for Background Checks

Local Youth Sports Coach Caught on Drug Charges

Mandatory Background Checks for Volunteers

Volunteer flag football coach for the Parks and Recreation Department booted for displaying a pornographic image on his cell phone to a group of 12 year olds

'Operation Santa Claus' Shut Down Due to Sex Offender