

Background Checks Important in Hiring for Church Positions

Background checks on all individuals being hired for work in churches are strongly encouraged by church, legal and insurance advisors.

"I can't say too strongly how important it is to do background checks before hiring individuals to work in our parishes, even in part time situations," said Bishop Edward Benoway. "We must do whatever is necessary to make our churches safe and sacred places."

In a recent example of what can happen without background checks, two churches of the Florida-Bahamas Synod hired an employee only to find later that the individual was listed online in the "Florida Sexual Offender and Predator" list. The offender was hired at one ELCA church, discovered and terminated, then hired at another ELCA church in the same county before being discovered and terminated again.

ELCA legal advisor David Ullrich offers the following helpful guidelines for churches that are hiring for full or part time positions:

1. There should be a job application completed for new hires.
2. It is legal to ask the question, "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?"
3. It is advisable to do a background check on new hires, especially those who have contact with youth.
4. You can check the state of Florida web site for sex offenders at <http://www3.fdle.state.fl.us/sopu/index.asp>.
5. Make sure you check all former employers and references carefully. An excellent question to ask is, "Would you hire this person again?"
6. If there is a gap in past employment, make sure you fully understand why.

In addition to the above, churches may consider a 45 to 60 day probationary period for new hires.

"It would be good to include guidelines such as these in every church's personnel policy handbook," advised Bishop Benoway.

Churches may also wish to consult with their insuring agency and/or attorney for other guidelines.