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Churches, other groups do more background checks

By ROSE FRENCH (AP) – 1 hour ago

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — More churches and religious groups are conducting background checks and taking other steps to protect children against mistreatment in the wake of the sex abuse scandal that has plagued the Catholic Church for years.

Children's advocates say not all background checks are equal, and warn religious groups they must be especially vigilant in screening clergy, volunteers and staff because their trusting communities are often targets for abusers.

Background checks should look into criminal databases at the local, state and federal levels and religious groups need other safety mechanisms in place, according to insurance companies. That's because many pedophiles don't have criminal records, either because they haven't been caught or haven't been prosecuted.

LifeWay Christian Resources, the Southern Baptist Convention's publishing and research arm, launched a partnership with backgroundchecks.com in 2008 to offer background screenings to Lifeway customers at discounted prices.

There is a \$10 basic-level background check option that includes a national criminal and sex offender search, said Jennie Taylor, a marketing coordinator at Lifeway. With nearly 16.2 million members, the Nashville-based SBC is the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S.

More than 900 different churches or organizations have conducted 11,277 background checks through Lifeway with backgroundchecks.com since 2008, according to Lifeway. Of those, 40 percent returned a hit — which is any kind of incident, ranging from minor traffic violations to felony convictions.

About 21 percent — or 2,320 searches — returned records with misdemeanor or felony results. More than 600 of those 2,320 returned felony offenses, Lifeway reports. Background information is then reported to Lifeway customers using the backgroundchecks.com service, and customers decide whether to hire job candidates.

Under pressure from victims rights advocates to fight child sex abuse in its ranks, the SBC in 2008 determined it should not create its own database to help churches identify predators or establish an office to field abuse claims.

But the denomination did offer to work with individual churches by helping with background checks and other precautions, and urged local congregations to vigorously check out employees and share information when warranted with other churches.

Taylor said Lifeway's partnership with backgroundchecks.com grew partly out of the call for more protections against child sex abuse in the SBC nearly two years ago.

"We thought most churches are doing this now anyway," Taylor said. "If they're not doing it, they're considering it and looking for options and sources to do it."

Insurance companies recommend churches and religious groups cover conduct background checks but often don't require such screening for coverage. Some of their recommendations include:

- _ Always have two adults in a room with children.
- _ Care for children in rooms with windows and keep doors ajar.
- _ People new to a congregation should not be allowed to work with children until they've been at the church or religious organization at least six months.

Insurers and child advocates also urge background checks not only be conducted on newcomers but with existing staff and volunteers periodically.

Rick Schaber, risk control manager for Merrill, Wis.-based Church Mutual Insurance Co., the leading U.S. insurer of worship centers and religious organizations with nearly 100,000 customers, said the number of clients conducting background checks has steadily gone up over the last decade because of "increased education and awareness."

He said Church Mutual recommends clients use LexisNexis background screening, which on average costs \$10 to \$12 to run checks. Prices vary based on the type of screening done. He recommends checks be conducted of local, state and national court records and to find out where someone has lived over the last 10 years and why they may have moved.

In 2007, 47,573 individuals were screened through LexisNexis by Church Mutual clients, Schaber said. In 2008, it was 48,109 and increased to 67,338 in 2009. He said the number is on pace this year to be 76,262.

Schaber said the company receives inquiries on background screenings "all the time" and noted

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Map



the two sections of the company's website that get the most hits are related to background screenings and child sex abuse.

"We do understand there's an upfront expense, and we know especially with the economy today religious organizations are struggling," Schaber said. "But it's important. And if you're not willing to invest this money up front for your children's programs, how do you look a parent in the eye if something does happen and you didn't take the proper steps to identify someone who was a risk?"

Greg Young, minister of education at Cedar Hill Baptist Church in Cedar Hill, about 40 miles northwest of Nashville, said his church started using backgroundchecks.com through Lifeway over a year ago to screen congregation members who work with children.

He said the Lifeway service has been very helpful and the church, which has an average Sunday attendance of 200, has run about a total of about 50-60 background checks. He said his church has not had any incidents involving abuse but wanted to try to safeguard against any possible mistreatment from happening.

"I think morally, it's the right thing for us to do," Young said. "What's the life of a child worth? You can't put a price on it."

Richard Dangel, president and CEO of the Arlington, Texas-based Praesidium Inc., an abuse risk management consulting firm, said his company conducts more than 100,000 background checks each year for their 4,000 clients, many of which include religious groups and organizations.

Less than 1 percent come back with a "disqualifying offense," which typically involves violence or a sexually related conviction, Dangel said.

"It's so small because only about 3 percent of sex offenders have criminal backgrounds," Dangel said. "Offenders go to places where they think they can get in. So while doing criminal background checks is prudent and thoughtful and responsible, it's not the end-all. It's a piece of the puzzle."

He said training staff and members at church and religious groups to recognize potential abuse before it happens is "far more critical than background checks."

"If you don't teach people how to spot warning signs and if you don't teach them how offenders infiltrate churches ... then they don't know when they're hit. They don't know until they've already got a victim."

Online:

LifeWay Stores/BackgroundChecks: <http://www.lifewaystores.com/lwstore/bgc.asp>

Church Mutual Insurance Co.: <http://www.churchmutual.com/>

Praesidium Inc.: <http://www.praesidiuminc.com/>

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