

Background checks help churches protect children

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NASHVILLE (BP)—Bill Jones, an associational director of missions in East Texas, had to deliver the message to one of the pastors in his association: “The man serving snow cones at your Vacation Bible School is a convicted sex offender.”

The pastor had approached Jones after learning a volunteer, who had been a “model church member” two years, might have had a criminal record.



The LifeWay security program runs background screenings on children’s ministry workers, camp counselors, bus drivers, or other volunteers and staff at discounted rates. The pastor “asked if I would do a background search, as I often do for our smaller churches that cannot afford it themselves,” said Jones, executive director of Neches River Baptist Association.

The report uncovered a sex offense conviction, so the pastor and one of his deacons dealt with the volunteer.

That church was one of nearly 5,000 churches and religious organizations that have used backgroundchecks.com over the past five years, through a

relationship with LifeWay Christian Resources. More than 84,500 background checks have been run through the LifeWay.com/backgroundchecks program during that time.

Half had some issue

Of those checks, 53 percent (44,946) returned some type of issue, said Jennie Taylor, a LifeWay coordinator who manages the program. Issues range from minor traffic violations to felony convictions, Taylor said. Not all of the issues required any action, but more than 22.5 percent (19,202) of the screenings returned records with misdemeanor or felony offenses.

The East Texas church now understands the importance of running background checks ahead of time, Jones said.

“They now have a policy that everyone who works in (children and youth) areas will have a current background check on file,” he said.

Monongahela Baptist Association in West Virginia also runs background checks on all volunteers for their children and youth camps.

“It’s a way to help keep kids safe,” said Jerilyn Smith, administrative assistant at the association. “We want to assure parents that we are doing all we can to protect their children from those who would want to harm them.”

Discounted rates

Under the LifeWay program, churches and religious organizations can use the background check service at discounted rates. The service runs background screenings on children’s ministry workers, camp counselors, bus drivers, or other volunteers and staff.

“Leaders from churches and organizations who use LifeWay’s background checks service say protecting those God has placed under their care is

paramount," Taylor said.

Having access to a national database was important for First Baptist Church in Brownsville.

Checks all 50 states

"I tried using another background check website, and they only searched through Texas," said Heather Smith, office assistant at First Baptist Church. Backgroundchecks.com examines records from all 50 states.

"All churches should run background checks and should have policies in effect on how those checks can be used in a redemptive manner for those that come back with a criminal past," Jones said.

For more information, visit LifeWay.com/backgroundchecks or call (800) 464-2799. For additional resources to help churches avoid the effects of sexual abuse and other moral failures by staff members or volunteers, visit www.sbc.net/localchurches/ministryhelp.asp and <http://sbclife.net/pdf/ProtectingOurChildren.pdf>.