

HOW TO Give and Get References Safely and effectively

Giving References

Did you know that it is possible to give references without exposing your nonprofit to undue liability? Follow these tips to update your reference-giving practices.

- ▶ Adopt a policy or procedure indicating that you will check references for prospective employees and provide written references for former staff. Make sure everyone in the organization understands the organization's policy on references.
- ▶ Include a statement about your policy/practice/procedure on your application for employment.
- ▶ Make satisfactory completion of reference checks a condition of employment.
- ▶ Obtain the written consent of every employee to provide references to future employers. Ask staff to sign a statement granting expires consent—either at the beginning of the employment relationship, or as part of the exit conference. The statement should explain that the organization provides references on former employees.
- ▶ Consider using a **reference form** and providing the employee with a copy upon their departure. A reference form documents the supervisor's assessment of performance and makes it clear to the departing employee what information will be provided to someone requesting a work-related reference. No surprises! Then its up to the employee to decide whether to list your nonprofit as a reference.
- ▶ Only disclose truthful, work-related information that is verifiable in the employee's personnel file. Truth is the ultimate defense to a defamation claim. A truthful statement may be unflattering but it cannot be defamatory.
- ▶ Designate through your organization's policies who has the authority to give references. Any supervisors or others who are authorized to provide references should receive training about the risks of negligent references and safe practices in reference giving.





Tips for Getting References

- ▶ Use a script asking the same questions of all applicants for a particular position.
- ▶ Make your managerial or supervisory position clear to the former employer and give a brief description of the position you are filling.
- ▶ Ask only position-related questions, including questions about past job performance.
- ▶ Remember, you can't ask a reference any question that you could not legally ask the applicant directly.
- ▶ Questions about personal characteristics should only be asked if they are relevant to the position's responsibilities or the conditions of employment.
- ▶ Refrain from asking leading questions or those that can be answered by a simple **YES** or **NO**.
- ▶ Obtain an applicant's permission to check references. Have every candidate sign a waiver granting the employer permission to contact previous employers and other personal references.
- ▶ Always check **MORE THAN ONE** reference!
- ▶ Use the reference checking process to verify employment history, and if the reference is given by telephone, listen carefully to the tone of the person providing the reference.
- ▶ Channel the interviewing and reference checking process through one or two people who have been trained.