

The Compliance Gap in Volunteer Management

From admin task to board-level risk: Why volunteer compliance matters.

COMPLIANCE

SAFEGUARDING

REPUTATION & RISK

People trust volunteers more than they trust paid staff. Nobody is paying them to say good things, so when they say them, it lands as real. That makes volunteers some of the most effective ambassadors any organization has.

It also means the risk runs both ways. An uncleared volunteer, a lapsed certification nobody caught, a background check that was never actually finished: these aren't just process failures. They are the fastest way to turn your most trusted asset into your most public liability. This paper argues that volunteer compliance has stopped being a back-office job and become a reputational exposure the board should be watching directly, and that closing the gap protects the organization's name as much as its legal position.



THE BOARD QUESTION

If a journalist, funder, or regulator asked for your audit trail today, could you produce it this afternoon?



Rosterfy's recent State of Volunteer Management 2026 research, a survey of volunteer-involving organizations in the UK, found that compliance plays a critical role in successful volunteer programs. The patterns will be familiar to program leaders in North America.

FINDING 01

Compliance is the top reason organizations want a system.

When asked what they look for from a volunteer management system, compliance and oversight of every volunteer tops the list at 82%, narrowly ahead of efficiency/reduced workload (81%).¹



FINDING 02

Half of organizations still have no dedicated system.

48% of organizations now use a volunteer management system, meaning just over half (52%) don't, and many of those are managing compliance manually, on spreadsheets, which offer almost none of the oversight, audit trail or safeguarding assurance those organizations say they need.²



FINDING 03

There comes a point when informal processes simply can't keep up.

In practice, a dedicated system tends to arrive once an organization passes around 150 volunteers, the point at which spreadsheets stop coping. Some volunteer-leadership commentary converges on a similar figure as the practical ceiling for one leader to maintain real oversight, though that's a practitioner view rather than survey data, and other sector sources put the threshold much lower, at 30 to 50 volunteers.^{3,4}



SOURCES

1. Rosterfy, The State of UK Volunteer Management 2026, p.14
2. Rosterfy, The State of UK Volunteer Management 2026, p.14
3. Rosterfy, The State of UK Volunteer Management 2026, p.14
4. Better Impact blog, "How Many Volunteers Are Too Many Volunteers?" (context only)

When compliance fails, it's your name on the incident report



For most of the sector's history, volunteer compliance was handled like any other admin task: someone owned a spreadsheet, chased outstanding checks, and filed the paperwork. That worked while a program was small enough for one person to hold the whole picture in their head.

It doesn't work anymore, and the reason isn't that people have become careless. Regulatory expectations have tightened. Programs have spread across more sites, entities, and jurisdictions than one coordinator can track by hand. And the time available to manage all of it hasn't grown to match.

What's changed is what's actually at stake. The old risk was a check that ran late. The real risk now is that an organization can't demonstrate, on the spot, that the person it put in front of vulnerable people, donors, or the public was actually cleared to be there. That's not a process gap anymore. It's a story waiting to happen, and once it's public, no coordinator can walk it back.

Because volunteers are also the most visible, most trusted part of an organization's public face, a compliance failure involving one doesn't stay contained to an internal file. It becomes the headline. The question a board should be asking isn't whether checks are being done. It's whether the organization could prove it this afternoon, to a journalist, a funder, or a regulator, without a week of scrambling first.

Why the usual fixes don't hold up under scrutiny

The spreadsheet

A spreadsheet records what someone remembered to enter. It doesn't enforce anything: it can't stop an uncleared volunteer being scheduled, it doesn't flag a certification that's quietly lapsed, and it produces an audit trail only in the sense that a filing cabinet does, provided everything was filed correctly, every time, by hand. Below a certain size, one coordinator can hold the whole picture in their head. Past it, the gap between the sheet and reality compounds silently until an incident, an audit, or a media inquiry exposes it.

Anthropologist Robin Dunbar's widely cited theory suggests people can maintain stable relationships with around 150 people, helping explain why managing a growing volunteer program through spreadsheets becomes increasingly difficult beyond this point.

The adapted system

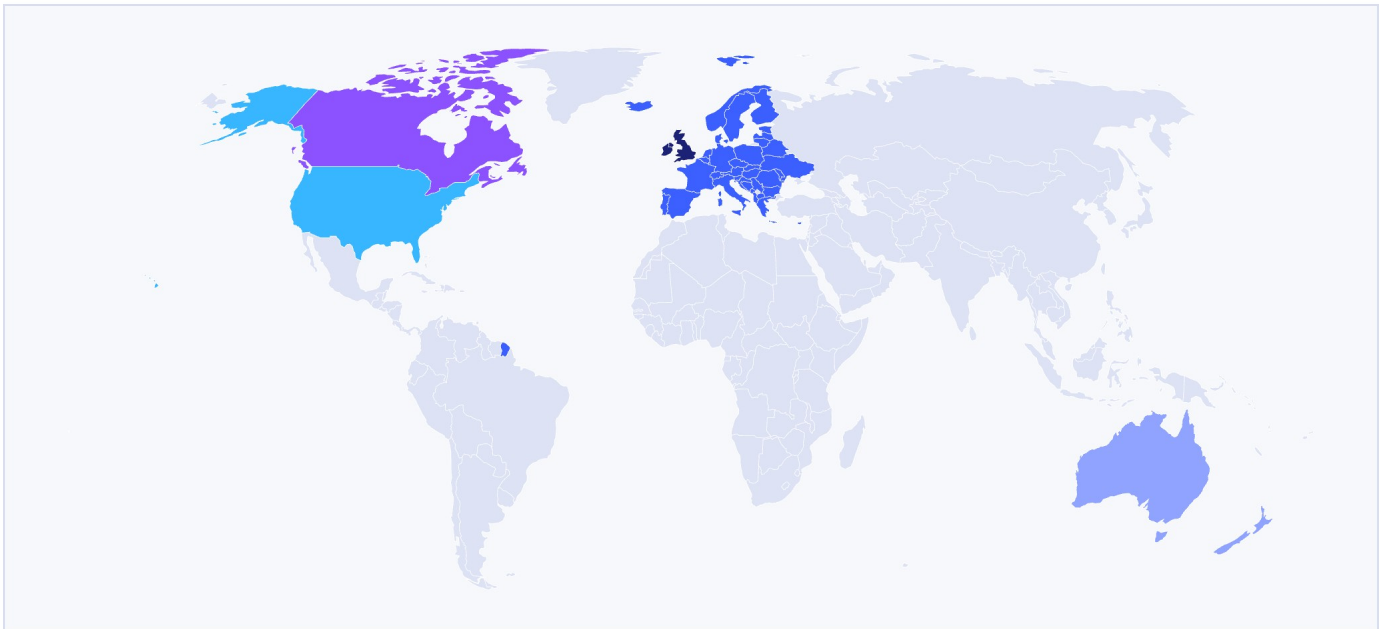
The second common approach bends a system built for something else, a CRM, a donor database, an in-house build, into a compliance workflow. It looks more robust, and in some ways it is. But none of these were built with volunteer compliance as the starting point, so expiration tracking and audit trails need constant custom maintenance rather than working natively.

This creates three key problems:

1. A continuity risk: the system's reliability depends entirely on the person or team who built and maintains it, and when they move on, so does the institutional knowledge of how it works and what it's supposed to catch.
2. An assurance gap: adapted and self-built systems rarely carry independent security certification for the volunteer-data use case, which leaves the organization demonstrating its own data protection compliance with no third-party backing.
3. And a regulatory drift risk: as requirements change across the jurisdictions an organization operates in, a theme we come back to in Section 3, updates depend on internal capacity rather than a vendor's dedicated compliance roadmap. Bespoke systems tend to fall behind.

The federated problem: no credential travels with the volunteer

For any organization operating across more than one state, province, or country, the gap has a sharper edge. There is no single national credential that follows a volunteer from one context to another, anywhere in the world, which means “we’re compliant” can be true in one office and false in the next without anyone noticing until it’s tested publicly.



- United States — 50 state processes
- Canada — provincial police record checks
- UK & Ireland — DBS / PVG / AccessNI
- Mainland Europe — national certificates, ECRIS
- Australia & New Zealand — state WWCC / Children’s Act

The pages that follow start closest to home, with the United States and Canada, then look at how the same problem plays out in the UK and Ireland, mainland Europe, and Australia and New Zealand. The systems differ. The gap doesn’t.

The United States of America

The challenge is consistent across every region: there is no single credential that follows a volunteer everywhere they go. For organizations operating across multiple states, chapters, clubs, or locations, compliance means maintaining central oversight while accommodating different local requirements. That becomes increasingly difficult to manage through spreadsheets or adapted CRMs, and makes multi-entity, multi-jurisdiction compliance an important consideration when choosing volunteer management technology.

SYSTEM / REQUIREMENT	WHAT ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO KNOW
State-level screening	The US has no single national volunteer screening system . Criminal record checks are largely managed at state level, creating different processes and requirements across jurisdictions.
FBI fingerprint checks	Larger or higher-risk organizations may use fingerprint-based FBI criminal history checks to provide broader screening beyond individual state records. ⁵
NCPA / VCA	The National Child Protection Act and Volunteers for Children Act provide qualifying organizations working with children, older people, and people with disabilities a route to FBI fingerprint records. ⁶
Accessing FBI records	Eligible organizations generally access these records through an authorized state agency , rather than dealing directly with the FBI. This means the process can still differ depending on the state. ⁶
Awareness and access	A US Government Accountability Office review found that some eligible organizations were unaware that the federal fingerprint-check route was available , adding another layer of complexity to volunteer screening. ⁷
Multi-state organizations	Organizations operating nationally may need to manage different screening processes and requirements across multiple states , rather than relying on one credential that follows a volunteer everywhere.

SOURCES

5. "National Fingerprint-Based Background Checks: Steps for Success," Federal Bureau of Investigation, [fbi.gov](https://www.fbi.gov)
6. 34 U.S.C. § 40102, "Background checks" (National Child Protection Act of 1993, as amended by the Volunteers for Children Act), [uscode.house.gov](https://www.ussc.gov/uscode/house.gov)
7. "Fingerprint-Based Background Checks: Implementation of the National Child Protection Act of 1993," GAO/GGD-97-32, US Government Accountability Office, [gao.gov](https://www.gao.gov)

Canada

Canada has no single national volunteer screening system either. Police record checks are requested through the local police service where the volunteer lives, and provinces set their own rules on check types, fees, and how results can be shared. For organizations operating in more than one province, or running programs on both sides of the border, that means managing several processes to one compliance standard.

SYSTEM / REQUIREMENT

WHAT ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO KNOW

Police record checks	Checks are conducted by the local police service where the applicant lives , not by a single national body. In British Columbia, checks for roles working with children or vulnerable adults run through the provincial Criminal Records Review Program instead. ⁸
Vulnerable Sector Check	Roles working with children or other vulnerable people may require a Vulnerable Sector Check (VSC) . In some cases applicants must submit fingerprints to confirm their identity, and checks are conducted separately for each position applied for. ⁸
Ontario	The Police Record Checks Reform Act, 2015 standardizes three tiers: a Criminal Record Check , a Criminal Record and Judicial Matters Check , and a Vulnerable Sector Check . Some police services, such as York Regional Police, waive fees for eligible volunteers. ⁹
British Columbia	Under the Criminal Records Review Act , covered organizations must screen employees and volunteers who work with children or vulnerable adults. Checks are free for volunteers , and verified results can be shared between organizations for five years with the volunteer's consent. ^{10,11}
Renewal	There is no national expiration date for a vulnerable sector check. Organizations decide how often a check must be repeated, so renewal cycles vary from one program to the next. ⁸
Multi-province and cross-border	Organizations operating in several provinces, or across the US–Canada border, may need to manage different check types, fees, and renewal rules for each jurisdiction, rather than relying on one credential that follows a volunteer everywhere.

SOURCES

8. "Vulnerable sector checks," Royal Canadian Mounted Police, rcmp.ca

9. "Police Record Checks Reform Act," York Regional Police, yrp.ca

10. "Criminal record checks," Province of British Columbia, gov.bc.ca

11. "Volunteers' free criminal record checks now in effect," BC Gov News, news.gov.bc.ca

The UK and Ireland

Background screening in the UK is not managed through a single national system. The table below outlines the key differences organizations need to consider when managing volunteer compliance across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

AREA	WHAT ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO KNOW
England & Wales	DBS checks are used for volunteers working with children or vulnerable adults. Depending on the role, this may involve a Basic, Standard, Enhanced, or Enhanced with Barred List check, with eligibility determined by the legal definition of regulated activity. ¹²
DBS renewal	DBS certificates do not have a statutory expiration date . Many organizations adopt an internal policy to re-check volunteers every 1–3 years as part of a proportionate, risk-based compliance process. ¹³
Scotland	Scotland operates the Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) scheme rather than DBS. It serves a similar safeguarding purpose but is administered under separate legislation. ¹⁴
Northern Ireland	Northern Ireland uses AccessNI for criminal record checks instead of DBS. Like PVG, it is a separate system and is not interchangeable with DBS.
International volunteers	Volunteers arriving from overseas may require an equivalent criminal record check from their home country , depending on organizational safeguarding policies and role requirements.
Barred list management	Organizations managing regulated activity need reliable processes to identify whether volunteers are eligible to work with children, adults, or both , and ensure barred list requirements are appropriately recorded and monitored.

SOURCES

12. "About us," Disclosure and Barring Service, GOV.UK, gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service/about

13. "DBS Check Renewal Rules for Employers," DavidsonMorris, davidsonmorris.com/dbs-check-renewal

14. "Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)," Royal College of Nursing advice guides, rcn.org.uk/Get-Help/RCN-advice/disclosure-and-barring-service

Mainland Europe

Europe does not have a single volunteer screening system. Requirements vary by country, creating additional compliance complexity for organizations operating across borders or managing international volunteer programs.

COUNTRY / SYSTEM	WHAT ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO KNOW
France	France uses the Bulletin n°3 criminal record extract . It can include certain convictions and prohibitions relevant to working or volunteering with minors, making criminal-record screening an important part of safeguarding. ¹⁵
Germany	People working with children or young people may be required to provide an enhanced certificate of conduct (erweitertes Führungszeugnis) . The requirement is supported by federal child-protection law, and fees can be waived for eligible voluntary roles. ¹⁶
Austria	Austria provides a special criminal record certificate for child and youth welfare roles . Eligible volunteers can receive the certificate free of charge when the voluntary nature of the role is confirmed.
Netherlands	The Netherlands uses the VOG (Certificate of Conduct) to assess whether a person's criminal history is relevant to a particular role. Eligible volunteer organizations working with vulnerable groups can access free VOG screening through the government program. ¹⁷
Cross-border / ECRIS	ECRIS enables EU member states' judicial authorities to exchange criminal-record information. This can be relevant where a volunteer has lived or has convictions in another EU country. ¹⁸

SOURCES

15. "Que contient le bulletin n° 3 du casier judiciaire?", French Ministry of Social Affairs, honorabilite.social.gouv.fr

16. "Erweitertes Führungszeugnis für Ehrenamtliche," Landkreis Regensburg; and "Führungszeugnis für Ehrenamtliche," City of Karlsruhe, citing §72a SGB VIII, karlsruhe.de

17. "Regels voor vrijwilligers en vrijwilligersorganisaties," Rijksoverheid.nl, rijksoverheid.nl

18. "European criminal records information system (ECRIS)," EUR-Lex, European Commission, eur-lex.europa.eu

Australia and New Zealand

Australia's state-based screening system creates particular challenges for organizations operating across jurisdictions, while New Zealand takes a more centralized approach. In both countries, organizations may need to manage multiple checks, different eligibility requirements, and ongoing renewals across their workforce.

COUNTRY / SYSTEM	WHAT ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO KNOW
Australia – Working with Children Checks	Child-related screening is managed by each state and territory , with different schemes and names. For example, Queensland uses the Blue Card ¹⁹ , while the ACT uses Working with Vulnerable People (WWVP) registration .
Australia – interstate checks	Checks are not automatically transferable between states and territories . In Queensland, for example, an interstate clearance is not recognized, so someone moving into eligible child-related work may need to apply for a Blue Card.
Australia – NDIS Worker Screening	Certain disability support roles may also require an NDIS Worker Screening Check . This serves a different purpose from child-related screening and does not replace a WWCC where one is also required. Some roles therefore require both checks . ²⁰
New Zealand – Children's Act	Under the Children's Act 2014 , organizations covered by the legislation must safety-check people who meet the definition of a children's worker. The process can involve identity, criminal history, and other safety checks.
New Zealand – ongoing checks	Children's workers covered by the safety-checking requirements must be re-checked every three years , making compliance an ongoing responsibility rather than a one-off onboarding task. ²¹

SOURCES

19. "Interstate working with children checks," Queensland Government, qld.gov.au/jobs/blue-card

20. "Worker screening," NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, ndiscommission.gov.au/workforce/worker-screening

21. "Safety checking," Oranga Tamariki, Ministry for Children, orangatamariki.govt.nz

Compliance is bigger than background checks

Background checks are the most visible part of the picture, but a defensible program has to hold several domains at once, each on its own clock, and each one a place a public failure could start.



Data protection

US state privacy laws, Canada's PIPEDA, GDPR / UK GDPR, Australia's Privacy Act, Brazil's LGPD. A mishandled data request is as reputationally damaging as a missed vetting check.



Training and certification

Safeguarding refreshers, first aid, food safety, and driving qualifications are essential. An untrained volunteer in a public-facing role doesn't just reflect poorly on your organization. It can lead to injuries, place vulnerable people at risk, and expose your organization to significant liability.



Health and safety

Risk assessments, signed waivers, incident logs, and insurance appropriate to the activity, often on the same legal footing as paid staff.



Right to volunteer and eligibility

Age verification and parental consent for under-18s, right-to-work nuance, and extra vetting for finance-adjacent roles like fundraising.



Sector and funder oversight

IRS Form 990 filings, charity regulators such as the CRA and ACNC. Ungoverned reporting here is its own funder-facing exposure.



Event-specific compliance

Licensed security for event staff, permits and safety sign-off for mass-participation events, the exact moments volunteers are most visible to the public.

Taken together, this is why a spreadsheet or an adapted system struggles at scale. It isn't one compliance record to maintain. It's several, each running on its own clock, and each one visible to a different audience if it fails.

Two people in the room, one shared risk

Volunteer Managers and Executives are often in the same buying conversation, worried about different halves of the same exposure.

THE VOLUNTEER MANAGER

The Volunteer Manager's question is immediate: is everyone scheduled today actually cleared to be there, and can that be shown quickly if asked? They're also weighing that against onboarding that feels so bureaucratic it puts people off before they've even started.

THE EXECUTIVE

The executive's question is structural: Where does this data live, who can see it, does the platform carry independent certification such as ISO 27001 or SOC 2, and does the whole system depend on one person's institutional knowledge rather than resilient infrastructure? Both questions are the same risk, seen from two different desks: can we prove what we say about ourselves, on demand?



What being able to prove it actually requires

If a funder, journalist, or regulator asked today, could the organization produce a complete, accurate account of who was cleared to do what, and when? A defensible answer has a few non-negotiable features.

- 01 Enforcement at the point of action:** Compliance is checked when a volunteer is scheduled, not discovered afterward. An incomplete or lapsed status blocks the assignment rather than generating a note someone might follow up on.
- 02 One authoritative record:** A single source of truth for every volunteer's status across the whole program, not several partial ones that need reconciling under pressure.
- 03 Expiration tracking that surfaces gaps early:** Certifications and checks that lapse are caught before they cause a problem, not during the incident review that follows one.
- 04 Data held to a standard you'd defend:** Access controls, clear data residency, and independent certification such as ISO 27001 or SOC 2, rather than an internal configuration nobody outside the organization has stress-tested.
- 05 On-demand reporting:** Evidence a board member, funder, or journalist can be shown directly, without the volunteering team building it by hand under deadline.

None of this is aspirational. It's the difference between "we believe we're compliant" and "we can show you right now," and that's the line a reputation actually stands or falls on.

The gap is closable, and closing it gives time back

This isn't a hypothetical fix. **Blessings of Hope**, a US food distribution nonprofit, cut volunteer onboarding time in half through automation and now saves 3,000 administrative hours a year, while growing from 7,000 annual volunteers to more than 40,000 registered.

British Heart Foundation cut the time it takes to onboard a new volunteer from 42 days to 21, and reduced a 54-step application process by roughly half, freeing coordinator time that used to go into manual chasing. At the other end of the scale, **Expo 2023 Doha** processed 50,000 volunteer applications in three days, a volume no manual process, however well run, could clear while keeping a usable compliance trail.

None of these organizations added headcount to close the gap. They gave coordinators back the time that manual compliance work was quietly consuming.



Blessings of Hope

3,000 hrs

Administrative hours saved each year, Blessings of Hope. **Onboarding time cut in half.**

[LEARN MORE](#)


42 → 21

Days to onboard a new volunteer, British Heart Foundation. **A 50% reduction in onboarding time.**

[LEARN MORE](#)


50,000

Applications processed in three days, Expo 2023 Doha.

[LEARN MORE](#)

KEEP EXPLORING

See how other volunteering organizations are navigating compliance.

Explore how Rosterfy's customers are ensuring compliance.

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Top 3 tips for navigating compliance within your organization

Enterprise / multi-entity organizations

- ☐ Map every jurisdiction and entity your program actually spans, and document which compliance requirement applies where. This is the exercise that shows the true size of the gap.
- ☐ Prioritize one source of truth and enforcement at the point of scheduling over any single feature. These two properties are what turn compliance from a record into a control.
- ☐ Bring IT and data governance in early, not at contract stage. Confirm data residency, access model, and independent certification (ISO 27001, SOC 2) up front, since deals that leave this to the end tend to stall.

Growing organizations approaching the tipping point

- ☐ Track how many hours a week coordinators spend on manual compliance checks, and where a delay is costing you a volunteer rather than just an hour.
- ☐ Start with your highest-volume, highest-risk cohort rather than attempting a full migration at once. Closing the gap where it's widest recovers the most time, fastest.
- ☐ Ask honestly whether your current tooling was built for the volume you actually run today, or for a smaller operation you've already outgrown.

Volunteer compliance has crossed a line. It's no longer something the volunteering team quietly absorbs. It's a reputational exposure the board is accountable for, and the organizations that have closed the gap didn't do it by working harder on the manual approach. They moved to infrastructure built for the full volunteer lifecycle, and got coordinator time back in the process.

The question this paper opened with is the one worth sitting with: if a journalist, funder, or regulator asked for your audit trail today, could you produce it this afternoon?

See where your compliance gap actually is.

Book a demo and bring your current onboarding and compliance timeline.

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