

AMERICAN RED CROSS CLARIFIES BACKGROUND CHECK POLICY

The American Red Cross (ARC) has attempted to clarify its policy to require background checks of its employees and volunteers, at least as far as the policy applies to possible credit checks. After the ARC announced the policy in July through its regional and local chapters, Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) members who support Red Cross disaster relief and recovery efforts began expressing concerns to ARRL. In some past incidents -- most notably the 2001 World Trade Center terror attacks and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina response -- ARES volunteers have had to badge in as Red Cross volunteers. In a statement <http://www.arrl.org/FandES/field/RedCross-LauraHowe-Statement.pdf> to the ARRL November 9, Laura Howe, the ARC's director of response communication and marketing, stressed that, while background check applicants must give permission to conduct a credit check, the ARC has no intention of conducting them across the board.

"The Red Cross realizes some volunteers may have concerns about authorizing a credit check. Those concerns are understandable," Howe said. "But please rest assured that credit checks are only run in rare instances and are not a part of the routine minimum basic check the Red Cross performs on employees or volunteers." Howe told the League that the "standard minimum check" verifies the applicant's Social Security number and a search of the National Criminal File for the past seven years.

"While the Red Cross will never run a credit check on the vast majority of its employees and volunteers," she asserted, "it is important that this standard language is included in the consent form to protect our clients, volunteers and employees."

The ARC has contracted with MyBackgroundCheck.com LLC (MBC) to handle the on-line background checks. MBC notifies the applicant's local Red Cross chapter whether or not the individual passed the background check, but it does not share any personal data.

In a statement <http://www.arrl.org/FandES/field/RC-Background-Checks0610.pdf> October 24, ARRL President Joel Harrison, W5ZN, urged ARES and other ham radio volunteers to tread cautiously and read very carefully what they are giving MBC permission to collect on behalf of the Red Cross, especially given the wide net being cast. Howe acknowledged that by signing the consent form, applicants do give MBC permission to "conduct a credit check or other investigation into an individual's background." ARES members are not obliged to submit to a background check, however; the choice to do so is a personal one.

Several ARES leaders maintain that they and their volunteers represent ARES when supporting the ARC as a served agency. "Our issue is not the background checking, but the fact ARC considers ARES members ARC volunteers," one ARRL Section Emergency Coordinator told ARRL. An ARES District Emergency Coordinator suggested the ARC policy is too arbitrary. "The unfortunate thing is that if a member decides not to submit to this check, then that will hamper our ability to serve the Red Cross in an emergency," he said.

ARRL Field and Educational Services Manager Dave Patton, NN1N -- whose department supports and oversees the ARRL Field Organization -- believes the

Red Cross stands to lose a fair number of volunteers because of the requirement -- and not necessarily just ARES volunteers.

The Statement of Understanding (SoU) between the ARC and the ARRL does not address the issue of background checks. It also is ambiguous on the subject of whether ARES volunteers automatically become ARC volunteers when supporting Red Cross operations and become subject to a background check. The bottom line: The requirement extends to whomever the Red Cross says it does. While some Red Cross chapters will allow ARES member participation without requiring that they register as Red Cross volunteers, others may not. The ARRL-ARC SoU is up for review in 2007.