

Fingerprint rules causing delays for workers and volunteers

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People who work with the most vulnerable members of society must be prepared to submit fingerprints, and possibly wait for months, as part of a new RCMP policy aimed at closing a loophole created by pardoned sex offenders who change their names.

As of July 9, anyone applying for a vulnerable-sector verification in order to work with children, the elderly or the disabled, whose birth date and gender match those of a convicted sex offender, is now required to submit to a fingerprint search. That process can take months and is presenting serious administrative challenges, say some RCMP detachments.

The odds of birth dates (including day, month and year) matching are high, as there are more than 14,000 pardoned offenders in the national database. The chance of a match for an adult male is just below 50 per cent and the older the man, the greater the

chance of a match.

If a match is found, fingerprints are taken on paper by local police and sent to the RCMP in Ottawa for comparison.

In the three months since the policy went into effect, there have been 9,600 fingerprint checks; in all of 2009 there were only 2,500.

Without the fingerprint check, performed against more than four million records, some sex offenders who received pardons and changed their names could have evaded detection.

But the new rules will delay clearance for many who are seeking employment or volunteer positions that require a vulnerable-sector check, routine for daycare staff, hospital workers, Girl Guide or Scout leaders, and coaches.

Mike Hodges, a New Westminster father of three girls who has applied to volunteer as an assistant soccer coach, said he's happy his daughters are being protected from criminals but he has privacy concerns.

When he went for his vulnerable-sector check a week ago, Hodges, 45, was told his birth date matched that of a sex offender and he would have to roll his thumbs in ink.

The RCMP say fingerprints are destroyed once they have been compared and are not stored in any database. But Hodges is concerned someone could make a mistake and his name could end up on a no-fly list or something equally damaging.

"You're giving up a bit of your privacy," he said. "It makes me question why pedophiles are allowed to change their names."

He said New Westminster police told him that it would take three to six months to process.

"It could take until the end of the season," he said. Fortunately, he said, he is allowed to coach while he waits for the paperwork to be processed.

But that hasn't been the case for all vulnerable-sector employees, who often require clearance to start work.

The delays have already affected South Granville Park Lodge, a senior-care home in Vancouver where volunteers are not allowed to start until their checks are in place.

"When they are hired we let them know, in writing, that their employment is contingent upon a current [criminal record check]," said Deborah Tobias, director of administration.

Tobias said volunteers have been discouraged by the lengthy process.

"There's no question that we lose volunteers over it," she said. "If they have to wait that long to get something, they'll go somewhere else."

Some health authorities will allow someone to work with provisions while they await their clearance.

Roy Thorpe, a spokesman for the Fraser Health Authority, said that if a potential daycare employee requires a fingerprint comparison, that person can work in the interim, but the daycare has to implement a safety plan.

"[It] has to satisfy the safety officer, and ... would likely include provisions such as not being allowed to be left alone with children," he said.

Robert Murray, a manager with the RCMP's Civil Fingerprint Screening Services, said pardoned offenders were evading detection by changing their surnames because officials were only checking names and ages.

According to Murray, the impetus for the policy change was the granting of a pardon to former hockey coach and convicted sex offender Graham James.

"If James had changed his name to Graham Smith, he could have walked into almost any police service across the country and they would have said, 'You're good to go; go coach some kids' hockey,'" said Murray.

This week, both the Sunshine Coast and Sidney North Saanich RCMP detachments sent out news releases alerting the public that the fingerprint checks were causing delays.

Murray said it usually takes two to four weeks to process prints with no match and 120 days if the prints match a criminal record. Those times haven't changed, but the number of prints being processed has increased. There is also a seasonal spike in the number of people who apply for checks.

"People do most of their volunteering in the fall," he said. "[There is a peak,] especially when it comes to student placements, new [jobs], hockey season starting up, Girl Guides, Scouts, and all that."

Andrew Froese, vice-president of South Vancouver Little League, said the delay is "definitely a concern."

"Our season only lasts 12 weeks," Froese said. "By the time we have parents and teams all set up, it's about a week before the season starts. Then we need parents to step up and say, 'Yes, I'll be a coach.' It's almost a moot point to get them to go for a background check, because by the time we get [it] back, the season's over."

For now, the league is sticking with coaches who have already had their criminal background checks, Froese said.

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