

THE PULSE

LOCAL ASSOCIATION NEWS NATIONWIDE

Association Leader Describes Pandemic Impact

The impact of COVID-19 has been felt by sports officials of every level across the country. The Kern County (Calif.) Officials Association is one of the many local associations impacted. Mark Roberts, the president of KCOA, shared with the local ABC 23 news station in March the impact felt by his officials.

"For a lot of officials, there's just an empty feeling that just everything was taken away," said Roberts, whose association has 250 members. "A big part of it is missing out on the game fees they get for working those games. They're also missing out on enjoyment for themselves, the fun of being out there and being a part of the game."

WNCOA Members Donate to Hospital

After assigner Brian Yates decided to return \$25 of the annual dues back to the officials of the Western North Carolina Officials Association (WNCOA) because of the cancellation of games in spring, many officials donated that money to doctors and nurses on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.

WNCOA, which covers schools around western North Carolina, raised more than \$1,000 for employees at Asheville's Mission Hospital and Advent Health Hospital.

"It's times like this that the heart of America shines," Yates said. "Even during a time when my folks are struggling with the loss of this income they are still willing to give back."

Ref Union Offers Interest-Free Loans

Ref Union, a California-based assigning group for travel basketball, made treasury funds available as interest-free loans to referees needing help paying bills because of lost games caused by COVID-19 cancellations. Qualifying referees were able to borrow up to \$500, interest-free, and can pay it back through officiating within six weeks of play resuming.

"This is a program that every high school unit, small-college conference, or major referee organization (especially those that host camps) could emulate and initiate," Ref Union Director Chris Balasinski said. "It costs next-to-nothing, takes relatively little time to set up, and if the right precautions are taken, has minimal risks."

SOURCES: ABC 23 NEWS BAKERSFIELD, CITIZEN TIMES

point in the service. Some people are shy, so why not designate one or two veteran members for each meeting whose duty it is to walk up and greet a fresh face? Show potential members around the place and pass them off to some of the other members so they feel they are being greeted by all and not just a designated individual.

5. Recognize Member Accomplishments

Maybe you are familiar with the phrase, "Give me my roses while I'm alive." Well, you have some members who have made some great accomplishments throughout their careers. Recognize those who might have just received their first state playoff assignment. Do you have a member who has reached a milestone within the organization such as 15 years of service? If so, recognize him or her with perhaps

a small token of appreciation, maybe even roses!

6. Encourage Members to Be Association Ambassadors

The best branding your association can ever have is from the members themselves. Encourage them to speak well of the association and provide ways for them to show pride in the group. Some of the items you can use to help them in their ambassador endeavors is to purchase items with the association's name on it that they can use to promote the brand. Items like pens, lip balm, T-shirts, polo shirts, even car windshield or bumper stickers, are all ways they can serve as ambassadors and tell the world you have a great association.

Jason Palmer is an associate editor at Referee and is an NFHS and USAV official. ■

BACKGROUND CHECK STANDARDS

By Donald C. Collins

Q Our association is implementing background checks for officials. Wondering if there are minimum standards for background checks?

A Association background check policies start with legal obligations. These obligations can come from state law, state governing body regulations, league contracts and safe sport requirements. Associations have to know what laws and regulations are applicable to them.

In the best-case scenario, a state governing body will take care of certifying officials' compliance by setting up a criminal background check service and keeping a list of officials who are "licensed" to officiate. On the other hand,

some states may have no laws or regulations, leaving associations to figure it out for themselves.

State criminal background check laws are just a starting point. Associations have the ability to do more.

First, associations need to address whether they want to do criminal background checks. The answer may vary depending upon whether state law requires it, and whether the state governing body or a national governing body does it for you.

If an association does want to do criminal background checks, the association has to decide how far to go. An association could simply ask a screening question on an application form. An association could also use a third-party search company. An association could even require fingerprinting.



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HOW TO ...

WIN LEADERSHIP RE-ELECTION

Unless you are a U.S. Senator with a six-year term upon election, the reality of winning any elected position is that you don't even have a chance to get your seat warm before you have to start worrying about re-election.

This is the case when it comes to association leadership, where most terms are two years. That leaves an elected officer little time to leave a mark and convince members he or she is the right person for the job again.

So how do you give yourself the best shot at re-election?

Just be you.

There's a reason you were elected to a leadership position in the first place. Based on your attributes, someone thought enough of you to nominate you for a seat on the board, and enough people agreed with that sentiment to vote you into office. So there is no need to be the tiger who changes its stripes. Continue being you.

Work hard.

Now that you have won one election, don't rest on your laurels. Show the membership they made the right choice. Attend board meetings and association gatherings. Offer input and suggestions, but don't have a bully pulpit. Represent the best interests of the association, not just the best interests of the leadership. And if you are still an on-court or on-field official, be a good example for your peers.

Under promise and over deliver.

If you want to stay in office, remain proactive yet moderate in what you plan to achieve. Set realistic goals, and once those are reached, then you can up the ante, as you have shown you are the type of leader who can make good on your election platform.

Set a term limit.

This may sound oxymoronic, given that you are trying to get re-elected. But people appreciate honesty. Share with the membership how long you would like to remain in office and why. People like to know that you have a plan for your service, and they also appreciate knowing your exit strategy.

Associations should consult with counsel before making any decisions. Every choice has some legal risk.

Asking a question on an application form runs the legal risk of a poorly phrased question. If the question is well phrased, an association has to determine what to do with the information it gets. Associations have to figure out what to do with information when they run third-party searches or require fingerprinting, too.

With information comes some duties. Bylaws need to be amended to address "closed session" discussions of personnel that won't be set out in the minutes. Lawyers need to be consulted because convictions are not absolute bars to employment. There must be a business justification. The things that bar one from officiating a youth game may not be a bar for a Midnight Basketball League or an adult recreation softball league.

Associations may look at all the legal issues that arise from criminal background checks and conclude doing nothing is the best solution. This conclusion isn't entirely unreasonable. We have not seen a wave of officials going around abusing, accosting, robbing and stealing from people. Indeed, it's the other way around. The players, coaches and spectators are the danger to the officials. Still, with each new year, and with each association that does criminal background checks, the legal pressure builds. We might be slowly crawling to an industry standard, and one can be liable for not meeting the standard.

Associations should note a complete background check consists of more than a criminal background check. Use an application and check references. You'll find out everything from the new applicant's ability level to other things that will give you a feel for your prospective new official.

Associations should note that there are a few cases where employers were liable for never checking a reference. Those cases are

few and far between, but it's wise to check references and to call the official's old association.

Associations should speak with an employment law specialist about what to ask on an application and what questions to ask — and not ask — when they call references. You can create legal problems if you don't ask the right thing in the right way.

Associations should also note some people don't like giving references. In truth, it's legally safe to give a negative reference — that's what is called a qualified privilege (which is a fancy way of saying you won't be liable for defamation when you give a negative reference). However, knowing one has a privilege doesn't compensate for the fear of being legally hassled for giving a negative reference.

If you can't get an answer from a reference, you can always ask the broadest question of all, "Would you assign this person again?" And ultimately that's why we do background checks — so we'll know whether that person should be officiating at all, and whether they should be part of our association. *Donald C. Collins is the commissioner of the San Francisco Section of the California Interscholastic Federation. He is a longtime basketball official and lawyer. This article is for informational purposes and is not legal advice. ■*

QUICK TIP

STEP UP LEADERSHIP

Whatever the situation for your association, it is important for officers to make the most of their position instead of serving the status quo. That makes for a healthy situation for not only the new officer but membership as well.