



In West Palm Beach, Fla., WPEC News 12 anchor and reporter Terry Anzur was repeatedly frustrated in her efforts to access information about the background of school volunteers. She told the story of those attempts in a Sunshine Week report that is archived online at <http://wpecnews12.com/engine.pl?station=wpec&id=13730&tempate=pagesearch.html>.

Sunshine Sunday: Volunteers in Public Schools

Terry Anzur: This is Sunshine Week, when news organizations across the U.S. are calling your attention to just how open your government really is. Here in Florida, all government documents are open, not only to reporters, but to citizens like you. Except in cases where the state legislature makes a special point to keep those documents "out" of public view.

But the I-Team found out getting access to some public records can be a long and expensive battle, even when the safety of your children is involved. Here's News 12's Terry Anzur with our I-team investigation.

Terry Anzur: It started with a simple question. Who's checking the backgrounds of the volunteers who work with children in our public schools? Last October, the I-Team asked to see the records of a program known as "V-I-P-S," or Volunteers in Public Schools. We've learned that some volunteers actually admit to having criminal backgrounds. But the Palm Beach County School District doesn't make it easy to find out who they are.

Video of principal, kissing a pig.

Anzur: When the principal of Pine Grove Elementary kissed a pig to celebrate the students' FCAT scores, some very special seniors shared the moment of triumph.

Dotty Feingold/volunteer: "My heart swelled. I really felt that we made a big difference with these children."
Jerry Feingold/volunteer: "We were thrilled to death."

Anzur: Jerry and Dotty Feingold are two of the seniors from Delray Villas who volunteered at Pine Grove during the 2002-2003 academic year, when the school's FCAT grade improved from a C to an A. But they also noticed how easy it was for just about anyone to sign up as a volunteer.

Jerry Feingold: There has to be a way to check the background of people. It would be very disturbing if I found that through a program that I was involved in, somebody did something bad to the kids. That would be terrible.

The V-I-P-S program has a good reputation... News 12 even did public service announcements to recruit volunteers.

Terry Anzur on Public Service Announcement: "Volunteer to be an FCAT tutor..."

Anzur: And the district's own brochures say that thousands have volunteered. More than 28-thousand last year, according to a spokeswoman, who also told me that school police do a background check on every single one. But when the I-Team asked to see the record/document be created, if one does not already exist."

Barbara Petersen, president of the First Amendment Foundation, and an expert on open records in Florida, found that hard to believe.

Barbara Petersen/First Amendment Foundation: "They've got volunteers in the classroom with our kids and they have no records of them?"

Anzur: The next day we got this letter. It says the volunteer applications are all on file here at school district headquarters. And this year for the first time the district started keeping track of volunteers in a computer database. But these records are not open to the public because the district claims they contain confidential information.

News 12 obtained a copy of the application all volunteers are supposed to fill out. It asks for the volunteer's address and phone number that this information must be "redacted" or blacked out. Charge for school district staff to redact and copy the 40-thousand pages of documents \$6,948.

Barbara Petersen: "In my experience, the exorbitant fees some agencies try to charge is nothing more than a barrier to your right of access."

Anzur: We have learned that more than 150 volunteers admit to having a criminal history, including 16 district employees and seven former employees who volunteer. But the school district wanted to hold back those applications because of the possibility that they says the open records expert.

Barbara Petersen: "That sounds more like a cover-up than it does a legitimate response to a public records request."

Anzur: Finally the district added a charge for determining which volunteers are related to law enforcement officers and other government workers who may request to have their home address information withheld from the public.

Barbara Petersen: No! No! No! No!

Petersen says the district must only withhold information when cops or other exempt workers make such a request in writing. Still, the district wanted to charge us for that too—a whopping \$39,105.

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