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Front Page

Youth coaches will now face background checks

Leagues agree with policy, but worry about cost

BY FRAIDY REISS Correspondent

A lot of folks in Freehold Township will be getting their fingers dirty in the coming months.

More than 1,200 people now must be fingerprinted, under the terms of an ordinance adopted by the Township Committee that requires background checks for people who have one-on-one contact with children during recreational programs.

"If a coach is not fingerprinted, he won't be able to coach in any program after June 1," said Sue McGough, Freehold Township superintendent of parks and recreation.

The law requires all parks and recreation employees and all volunteer coaches and managers of nonprofit youth-serving organizations - including Pop Warner football, Little League baseball and Freehold Soccer League programs - to have their fingerprints checked every 24 to 36 months through the FBI and the State Bureau of Identification. The measure applies even if the volunteer coach or manager is under the age of 18.

Each criminal history record background check costs about \$100, McGough said, which means the fingerprinting process "is going to be very costly."

The parks and recreation commission will absorb

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the fees for its 750 volunteers and 25 employees, McGough said. To cover the expense, the commission will raise the price of its programs by \$5 each and the cost of its summer camp program by \$100, although the latter includes costs for other improvements as well, McGough said.

As for the Little League, Pop Warner and soccer programs, McGough said the directors of those organizations can decide whether to follow Howell's lead and pass the fee on to their coaches, or absorb the cost of the background checks.

Lou Piccola, former president of the Freehold Township Little League, said it was "unreasonable" and "unfair" to require the volunteer organization to pay for background checks for its 275 coaches and managers. Little League officials always checked with the police department regarding prospective volunteers and the organization never had a problem, he said.

"I agree you have to do background checks," Piccola said, "but what was wrong with the other policy?"

Besides, he said, Little League could not ask its coaches to pay \$100 to volunteer their time, so he did not know how the organization would come up with \$27,500.

"Everything sounds great, until you have to pay for it," he concluded.

Joe Drago, president of Greater Freehold Area Pop Warner, also said he did not know how his organization would raise the money for background checks on its approximately 40 volunteer coaches and managers.

"That's \$4,000 that a nonprofit league has to pay," he said. "We're hoping the township is going to pick it up, because they're mandating it."

He added, though, that while the cost of background checks is "definitely a problem," it is something that "has to be done."

"You have to protect the kids," Drago said.



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Freehold Soccer League President John Turner-Byfield said he, too, did not know how he would pay for background checks for the club's approximately 200 coaches.

"It's painful, but you have to do it," he said. "You don't know where the predators are. You don't know what cloak they're hiding under."

Stephanie Samuels, the local mom who urged municipal officials to introduce the ordinance and who helped to draft it, thanked the members of the governing body for adopting the measure but added that parents still must remain vigilant to keep their children safe from predators.

"There's nothing legislation can do if parents don't help" by notifying the proper authorities about incidents of sexual abuse, Samuels said. "We need the help of every parent in order to make sure what we've written is followed through."