

Membership Applications: Can we ask *That*?

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You have just been elected to your department's Membership Committee and the first order of business is updating your membership application form. You have not read the application for membership since you applied ten years ago and are unsure where to start. The importance of the membership application is often overlooked – not only is this the first opportunity that you have to screen potential members to your Emergency Service family, this is your opportunity to put your best foot forward as a professional service entity. Knowing the right questions to ask can not only help you determine if your candidate will be a valuable asset to the organization, but may also help you to avoid a discrimination law suit and negative publicity in your community. This article will assist you with addressing a few specific areas of concern when screening a new applicant for membership in your department.

Most departments are pretty comfortable asking the basic demographic information; residential address, full name, employer, contact information. People start to get a little nervous when they are faced with the issues of age, gender, physical ability/disability, etc. Truthfully, questions specific to any of those listed may be considered unlawful and open your organization to a discrimination law suit. How a question is phrased will determine whether or not it is legal to include on your application. There are also certain questions that you cannot ask prior to accepting a new member that you can ask once you make them a probationary member. There is a fine line between what may be deemed 'needed information' and what would be considered as inappropriate inquiries by the Human Rights Law. Department applications should limit inquiries to questions that absolutely need to be answered to select a new member.

No one will argue that firefighting is one of the most physically taxing jobs that a person can perform. However, the membership application is not the means for determining if a prospective member is physically capable of fulfilling the duties required of a firefighter. Questions about an applicant's health, physical condition and/or ability to do tasks should be handled by your organization's appointed physician during the entry level screening physical. If your department does not currently require annual physicals of all of your members, now may be a good time to consider implementing this policy.

Another crucial position within the fire department is the apparatus driver. It may be tempting to screen driving records prior to accepting a prospective member, but in many States this is considered discriminatory. You may ask if they possess a valid driver's license, but you may not require them to produce a copy of their license as a requirement of membership. Once they have been accepted as a member, you can ask specific questions about their license and driving record.

Although not everyone is sensitive about their age, it is considered unlawful to ask an applicant their birth date. You *may* ask if they are 18 years of age or older, but if you distinctly ask for their current age, you run the risk of discriminating based upon age should this person not be elected to membership status or if you only allow them to perform only certain duties based solely upon their age.

Membership applications are an important tool for screening potential members of your fire department. The application should be considered the first step in a multi step process to becoming a permanent component of your emergency service organization. For more information on developing a membership application for your fire department or EMS agency, please contact *Emergency Services Insurance Program's (ESIP)* customer service line – 1.800.822.3747 ext. 176.