

Complete Nationwide Background Checks: An Open Letter To An Angry Woman

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Thomas Goodpaster is a Minnesota licensed Private Detective, and is the owner of Blue Heron Investigations in the "twin cities" of Minneapolis and St. Paul. He writes this open letter to an angry woman who sought his help with a background check.

I'm a licensed Private Detective and I just got off the phone with one very angry potential client who ultimately hung up on me. It would seem that she thought I was trying to take advantage of her, and she wasn't going to tolerate that!

She had asked (quite politely actually) that I conduct a complete background check on a man that she had recently met online and with whom she intended to spend some time in the near future. I suggested that I could check for both criminal and civil court records involving the man within the state of Minnesota where he resides. I offered to check at both the state and county levels to find such things as "Domestic Assault", "Dissolution With Child", "Possession and Sales of Narcotics" and other such matters as might exist.

She liked what I had to say until I quoted her the rate for this service; things went rapidly downhill from there. She already knew (she was kind enough to inform me) that she could obtain a "Complete Nationwide Background Check"* for as little as \$25.00 online. That "complete" check wouldn't just be thorough (encompassing the man's entire life story I'm to assume), but it'd include anything and everything wherever it might exist within the country. And yet, here I was quoting her well over \$100.00 to check for "just" criminal and civil court records in "just" one state and its various counties. She hung up on me after letting me know just what a scammer I must be.

I never did get a chance to offer an explanation, but maybe now's my chance. If you're out there reading this, I just wanted to tell you.....

The term "Background Check" means different things to different people. To an employer it might include educational degree and driver's license verifications. To a landlord, it's a simple check of credit history and outstanding judgments. To someone dating a new person, it might mean verifying that the person really has gone through with the divorce with his or her supposed former spouse. And to certain three-lettered governmental agencies, no background check would be considered complete without talking to the neighbors where "little Jimmy the applicant" grew up 30 years prior. There's nothing wrong with any of these individual definitions.

As you can see though, there simply is no singular definition of "background check". It's unlikely you'll even find two Private Detectives to agree upon one. And even I, a licensed

private detective, have to offer multiple background check services to my clientele since no one “complete” background check will ever serve the needs of everyone who calls.

So, the first thing for you, the consumer, to do is - define “background check” for yourself. What are you really interested in knowing? What do you really need? What's irrelevant and would be a waste of your money if you were being charged for it? Never mind everybody else; we'll let them define “background check” according to their own needs. What are yours?

If you just so happened to define a background check as a search for criminal and civil court records in your state (and there's nothing wrong with that definition if it meets your particular needs) we have to know a little something about where those criminal and civil court records can be found if we want to avoid paying for something that we either don't need, or (worse yet) aren't actually getting.

While it is true that many criminal and civil court records can be obtained from most courthouses throughout the United States, it simply is not true that there is any one source that compiles all of this data in one central location. While records might be available to anyone with an Internet connection in one state, another state may only release records if the requestor physically enters the courthouse where the record is located. To further complicate matters, some states mix things up a bit and offer some records online while certain other records can only be obtained by visiting the courthouse in person. Are you now starting to wonder just how anyone could check the entire country for criminal and civil matters for only \$25.00 given that some (most) records can't be accessed online?

So, how can an online vendor (or any PI for that matter) provide a \$25.00 “Complete Nationwide Background Check”* if in-person visits to the courthouses are required in many (most) jurisdictions? How can any online vendor or PI make a profit, if literally hundreds (if not thousands) of criminal courts don't release the information online? The simple answer is - they can't. They can only make a profit if they don't provide you with a complete, and up to date, check for records. A complete check, that's up to date, would cost them thousands of dollars and untold man-hours to complete.

When you pay such a nominal sum to an online vendor or PI, what you're likely paying for (whether you intend to or not) is for that online vendor or PI to purchase a “Criminal Records Check” through a third party database provider that they subscribe to. These checks may cost them as little as \$5.00, are usually at least a year out of date, and virtually always woefully incomplete. But only \$5.00. Now, we understand how they can make a profit - if you just avoid telling the client what's not included (hundreds of jurisdictions, last year's cases, the entire state of....) we can sell \$25.00 “Complete Nationwide Background Checks” and still make a profit. \$20.00 + \$20.00 + \$20.00.....

Which is not to say that there's anything wrong with any of this (their level of search), so long as you know what you're not getting for your money. The problem only lies (no pun intended) with the deception. There may be times when a \$25.00 check is okay - maybe half of the story is enough of the story to “get a feel for the book”. Other times, missed

data (that you're not even aware is missing) could potentially lead to horrific (and I really mean horrific) consequences!

When you find a licensed Private Investigator who quotes a fee in excess of a hundred dollars (and, quite often, significantly more)* to conduct a background check for you, you've likely found yourself a professional who truly understands his own state's records laws, and knows the means and methods of obtaining the documentation that you're paying for.

Do as you wish Ms. (I'm sorry, but I never did get your name), but you might just want to consider paying your local, licensed, PI those few extra dollars he quoted you on the phone today.

Me? – I'll be here if you'd like to call back.

* The term "Complete Nationwide Background Check" is used as a generalization; it does not refer to any particular product or service provider. Neither the author, nor Blue Heron Investigations guarantees the accuracy of a background check, or the professionalism of a licensed private investigator, by virtue of paying more than \$100.00 for a background check.

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