

The Principle of Informed Consent

Informed Consent simply means that all volunteer missions participants must be informed of the possible risk factors (present and potential) of a mission trip.

Most team leaders, churches and agencies provide a liability waiver for all participants in volunteer mission. Once a mission volunteer is informed and aware (often during an info-night or initial team orientation), the agency will usually have each participant sign a consent form relinquishing liability in case of death, injury or even financial loss if the sending agency needs to send a participant home early. Make sure you have the right person with the appropriate skills (legal representative) review *your* consent form to ensure the document is appropriate for your church or agency and participants.

More importantly, a team leader or short term mission committee must also be aware – that even after participants have given written consent - it remains the responsibility of the team leadership to be aware of any changes in the risk level, and to inform all participants as the situation changes. If it can be shown that a reasonable person could have been aware of a change in the risk level, *and did not inform the team participants*, they could be held liable for damages, even if a consent form was signed.

For example: In January you inform people of the risks and have everyone sign the liability waiver as you begin your preparations to take a team to build a Mexican community centre in June. In March you hear about an increase in gangland activities because of a new election call in the city you are going to be travelling through. If you do not inform the team of this change in the risk level, the waiver that they signed at the beginning of the process may no longer be appropriate or valid.

Perhaps most importantly a team leader must understand that if a reasonable person could or should have been aware of an increased risk - *even if they are not aware or never heard of the risk* - the sending agency may still be held responsible and liable. It is the responsibility of the sending agency to actively make sure that they are staying informed of changes in the level of risk.

As a minimum standard of care, start today to recognise the risks and clearly articulate them to potential participants. A brief sampling of the questions your church or agency might consider:

1. How are you collecting informed information on potential risks?
2. How do you evaluate all of the possible sources of risk assessment information?
3. What is your churches go/do not go policy? What prompts an early return?
4. Have you asked your team members what would cause them to return home early?
5. How are you ensuring you have updated and on-going information about potential risks?

Of course we do not want to create an unreasonable fear or tension, this talk about risk may suggest that individual participants frequently sue sending agencies, and frankly, this is a rare case. Neither do we want to create the impression that mission is a 'safe adventure - there may be too much simple and easy mission out there already. The only promise regarding a missional life is that it will be complex and maybe life-changing. If risk is your first priority, *then do not go*, yet realise that you might be discouraging others from becoming what we most want to be – the kind of people who risk themselves for others.

Still unsure? Invite someone from the STM Network to walk your mission committee or leadership team through this or other important questions. We have the expertise and experience to help. To have us in your next missions meeting, email us, it may be as easy as a free Skype chat, or, if we are close by, we can always drop in.