TasCOSS

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How to get informed consent to gather information from clients

The level of information that you need to provide varies with how much participation in research or evaluation you are asking for and is strongly related to how much being involved in the process involves risk for the participants.

Asking for permission to gather data for reporting purposes is part of the normal consent you get at the beginning of your contact with a client. If you are just counting numbers for an outcomes reporting exercise for your funder you may not need to have elaborate informed consent processes.

However, in the following situations you must get written consent from the people you are collecting information from:

- if it takes significant time to collect the information
- if you are asking sensitive questions
- if you are collecting information from a focus group or interview or you are writing a case study
- if you intend to publish the results of the data gathering
- And of course, people who are giving information as part of a *research* process must give informed consent to participate in the research and for their information to be used.

How is research different from gathering reporting information? Gathering outcomes information, even gathering information to answer broader evaluation questions is not research. Research aims to generate new knowledge, test new ideas and publish them. Evaluation judges the value of policies and programs and provides information for decision-making about those specific programs.

There are three conditions for consent to be considered ‘informed’:

- people must have enough information about the research or evaluation to make the decision about whether or not they want to participate
- they must understand the information, and
- they must agree to participate voluntarily.

Often this information is given in a written Information Sheet. Depending on how much information you are gathering and how sensitive the information is, consent can be given verbally.

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Here is a step-by-step guide on how to obtain informed consent.

Make sure people understand what they are agreeing to

It is normal practice to give people an Information Sheet which tells them all they need to give informed consent. If you think literacy might be an issue for the people you want to collect information from, you will need to talk through the information sheet with them.

Make sure you use plain English and avoid jargon and acronyms. Use interpreters if needed.

Click here to see a Guide to writing an Information Sheet for research or outcomes reporting participants. This is one developed by Anglicare Tasmania for its research team and it is based on the ones recommended by the UTAS ethics committee. The language in it is quite formal but it's a guide only; for each project the Anglicare researchers would rewrite this into plain English.

Make sure people know that changing their minds about participating won't cause them any problems

It's important that people know they can change their mind about being part of your project or evaluation without it causing them any problems, for example if they change their mind, it will not affect their ability to use your service. You should very clearly explain that whether they decide to participate or not, their access to services will be exactly the same.

Ask people to sign a Consent Form

Click here to see a Guide to writing a statement of informed consent used by Anglicare Tasmania's research team. (They call their consent form a Statement of Informed Consent.) You can substitute the word 'evaluation' for 'research' if you use this template.

Referenced links

- Guide to writing an Information sheet for research or outcomes reporting participants
- Guide to writing a statement of informed consent