

NIS - Assessing Mental Competence – excerpt from interviewer training manual

With the oversampling of mental health facilities in the year 3 NIS, it is necessary for interviewers to be able to assess inmates' ability to understand the consent form and coherently answer questions in the interview. We have built in several steps to ensure that inmates who participate in the study are competent to do so:

1. This year, we have added an additional step to the consent process. After the consent form is read, the interviewer reads a script which reviews the main points of the consent – the voluntary nature of the study, what the inmate can do if he/she becomes upset by the questions, and the confidential nature of the study. The interviewer will ask if the inmate understands these points and will answer any questions that the inmate has, re-reading any relevant points. If the interviewer believes that the inmate does not understand the consent form after repeated questioning, the interview should not be conducted.
2. If the interviewer believes that an inmate is temporarily impaired (e.g. drunk or high), she is instructed to assign a temporarily impaired code and attempt to contact the inmate on another day.
3. There may also be situations in which the interviewer believes an inmate is not mentally or cognitively capable of following instructions or understanding questions. If the interviewer believes that an inmate simply does not understand what the study entails or the questions being asked during the informed consent process, or if the inmate is not responsive to questions or is incoherent when speaking, and the interviewer has no reason to believe the inmate's condition is temporary, she is instructed not to proceed with the interview, excuse the inmate, and assign the appropriate event code.
4. Facility personnel can identify inmates who they believe are not mentally competent to participate in the study. Interviewers should not solicit facility staff input on this matter, but if facility staff indicate that a certain inmate may not be able to participate, interviewers should consider this information when interacting with the inmate. In some cases, facility staff may indicate an inmate cannot participate in the NIS because of mental health reasons or because the inmate is a danger to himself, herself, or others. These statements should be taken seriously and such inmates should not be interviewed and assigned the appropriate event code.