

# Guidelines for Using Incentives in Research

An incentive is sometimes used to encourage participation in research. This can include (but not limited to): checks, cash, gift cards, event tickets, food items, cell phones, computers, or any materials used in the study that are not returned to the researcher, etc. Compensation given to cover a participant's study expenses (i.e. travel, lodging) is not considered an incentive.

The Virginia Department of Health Institutional Review Board (VDH IRB) does not regulate specific incentives. Instead the VDH IRB evaluates the incentive based on the risk in the study and the participants involved. If the incentive entices a participant to take on risks they would not normally do then the IRB considers the payment unethical. For example, paying a low-income participant a large sum to participate in a risky medical procedure would be unethical. The incentive should not be the sole driving force for participating in the study.

Although the VDH IRB does not regulate specific incentives, please note that the research funding source or researcher's institution/agency may have more specific requirements regarding the types of incentives including the amount of any payment.

Your research protocol should provide sufficient details regarding the recruitment of participants and the consent process as it relates to incentives. All advertisements recruiting research participants should detail any incentives, however incentives should not be the main focus of the advertisement. The consent form should provide the participant with information on any incentive. Information on withdrawal from the study and how this will impact the incentive should also be included in the consent form. Generally, the VDH IRB requests that the participant be either given the entire incentive or that the payment be prorated according to the amount of participation. Any incentive policy should not be such that it coerces a participant to complete the study.

The research protocol should also include a detailed explanation of how the incentive is provided to the participants. You will need to describe how the incentive will be issued and what you will do to protect confidentiality and anonymity. For example, if you are conducting a survey and plan to provide an incentive to participants then you need to devise a method for issuing the incentive that is separate from the survey.

Note: Always check with your funding source and/or institution/agency to determine any additional requirements relating to the provision of incentives.

September 19, 2019