

Answers to Common Questions 2006-2007

1. When will I know my country and project assignment?

Assignments will be made beginning the first of February provided that the complete application has been submitted in full and on time. Project assignment changes, although rare, would be made in response to a change in political events in a specific country or a change in an airline schedule. Projects occur between mid-June and mid-August.

2. Will I live with a family?

It is AMIGOS intent to house every volunteer with a family. Sometimes, however, this is not possible due to the lack of appropriate housing options in some communities. The International Office must approve alternative housing, and volunteers would likely live in a local clinic, church, community center or school. Project staff visit communities in advance of the volunteers' arrival to determine eating and living arrangements. Volunteers are encouraged to report any problems promptly to the project staff.

3. How are volunteer partnerships made?

Volunteers are typically assigned one or two AMIGOS partners for their community placement. AMIGOS has established standards for the placement of volunteers in order to insure that everyone is placed in situations which are culturally appropriate and safe (i.e., male and female partners must have separate sleeping quarters). Project staff also consider volunteers' preferences and language abilities when assigning partnerships.

4. Why do you need both parents' signature? My parents are divorced and I don't know where my father lives.

It is AMIGOS policy to have signatures of both parents because many Latin American countries require a parental release for minors. The parent with sole custody, however, can sign and attach a copy of the custody agreement in lieu of the second signature.

5. Exactly what documents do parents need to sign?

Parents of volunteers under 18 years old must sign the following: Release Form, Acknowledgment of Standards of Personal Conduct and Community Behavior, Parent Permission to Travel Form, Confidential Health Form, and the Financial Assistance Application (optional).

6. What kind of training does AMIGOS provide the volunteers?

The AMIGOS training program offers hands-on experience to learn the necessary skills. In chapter training groups, the correspondent training program and in-country briefing volunteers learn and practice the human relations, cross-cultural, language, leadership, health and safety and technical skills they will need for their project.

7. Can AMIGOS volunteers receive school credit?

Many volunteers do arrange to receive school credit for their participation. In some high schools, credit is built into the curriculum. Ask your Chapter Leaders in addition to a school guidance counselor. For college students, AMIGOS can be structured to be an independent studies course. Talk to professors in the departments of Spanish, Portuguese, Latin American Studies, political science, anthropology, and geography. If you still need assistance, contact the AMIGOS International Office. Credit must be pre-arranged in all cases.

8. Is the food and water in Latin America safe? How can I be sure I will not get sick?

During training you will learn how to protect yourself from more harmful conditions by eating cooked foods and freshly peeled fruits and vegetables. Water is one of the culprits that can cause diarrhea and gastro-intestinal illness. Volunteers should boil their water or take water purification tablets with them. Volunteers can also drink bottled water or soft drinks. Most volunteers do get diarrhea sometime during the summer.

9. Aren't the health care facilities rudimentary? What kind of health care would I receive if I get sick?

Health care facilities in Latin America range from clinics staffed by the U.S. equivalent of medical residents to hospitals fully staffed with a full range of specialists. The project staff makes arrangements for volunteer health care and will help volunteers receive prompt care in a respected health care facility. Volunteers carry an emergency card with instructions about how to seek medical care. Project staff consults with the International Office on-call team about volunteer illness and treatment. The AMIGOS Medical Director reviews the treatment and medication given to volunteers.

10. What will happen if something serious happens to my child in Latin America? Can I get to her? How long would it take to get her back to the U.S.?

The response depends on the situation and seriousness of the problem. AMIGOS may transport volunteers from their communities immediately by private car, ambulance or even helicopter to a major hospital. The volunteer may receive immediate treatment from a physician in the local clinic. The project staff consults with the local physician, the AMIGOS International Office and the AMIGOS Medical Director to determine what is best for the volunteer based on known information. Parents will be called immediately if the situation appears to be a medical emergency. In cases of extreme emergency, when adequate treatment may not be available in the volunteer's assigned country, the short-term medical insurance carrier will help AMIGOS facilitate medical evacuation to an appropriate medical facility and/or air transport the volunteer to his/her home city. Emergency treatment and medical evacuation may be influenced by the volunteer's health insurance coverage and pre-existing medical conditions.

11. How can I be sure my son or daughter is safe when I just saw on TV the serious governmental problems in Latin America?

AMIGOS first priority is the safety of the volunteers and project staff. Work areas are confirmed in the early fall of each program year. Each area is monitored before and during the summer for overall safety conditions. In addition, volunteers are given a step-by-step plan in case of day-to-day crisis, natural disasters or political upheaval. This information is on an emergency card that volunteers carry with them. International Trustees in the host countries keep the International Office in Houston abreast of possible problems and the International Office maintains contact with U.S. Embassies and other sources of security information. Programs will be changed or canceled at any time if the safety of the volunteers is in question.

12. What do I pack?

What you pack will depend on where you are assigned. Packing suggestions can be found in the Volunteer Handbook and in the Volunteer Country Materials.

13. I graduate the day of departure and am very independent. Can I arrive just one day late?

No. All volunteers assigned to the same project must travel to and from Latin America together. Often the volunteers must travel to remote sites for in-country briefing. The staff cannot wait for stragglers. A variety of program lengths and starting dates can accommodate different schedules.

14. After the project is over, can I stay in Latin America and travel?

If you are at least 18 years old, AMIGOS may release you after the project terminates, provided you have completed the appropriate forms. If you are under 18, AMIGOS will only release you in country into the custody of your parent or legal guardian unless there are extenuating circumstances and prior authorization.

15. How do I communicate with my child during the summer?

Phone communication may not always be an option, particularly in rural communities. A summer mailing address will be provided to volunteers prior to their departure. Depending on assignment, mail can take anywhere between 1-3 weeks to arrive. Therefore, parents and friends are encouraged to begin writing letters prior to volunteer departure. Remember that no news is good news. Families will be contacted if there is an emergency. If there is a family emergency and parents urgently need to reach their son/daughter in Latin America, please call the International Office (800-231-7796 ext. 150) who can relay a message to project staff who will assist the volunteer in calling home.

16. Why does AMIGOS work in Latin America when there is so much need in the U.S.?

Although promoting improved public health in Latin America is an important aspect of the AMIGOS program, it is only one part of the organization's mission. AMIGOS also is committed to providing opportunities for leadership development and cross-cultural understanding in the Americas. Living in another culture and using another language provides opportunities for personal growth. The volunteers bring back to their home communities increased self-confidence and caring attitudes that are reflected in community activities for the rest of their lives.

17. Where does the money go?

Approximately 80% of each dollar raised by the organization goes directly to cover the cost of the program. Program expenses include training materials and workshops, international travel, supervision of the volunteers, a 24-hour emergency support system during the summer, planning and management of the Latin American projects, and supplies for volunteers' community service activities, such as cement. Host communities in Latin America contribute the food and lodging for the volunteers. The other 20% covers overhead costs of the organization such as insurance, telephone and other administrative expenses.

18. Who runs the organization? How stable is it?

Founded in 1965, AMIGOS is governed by an International Board of Directors with day-to-day activities coordinated by the International Office staff in Houston. AMIGOS meets the criteria for exchange programs set by the Council on Standards for International Educational Travel. AMIGOS also has a Letter of Understanding with the Pan American Health Organization and is a member of the Independent Sector and Inter Action.

19. My friend and I are studying together. Could we be assigned together?

No. One of the many facets of the program is having the opportunity to work with people from diverse backgrounds. This serves as another dimension of the learning experience in AMIGOS.

20. Will an AMIGOS representative meet my child when he arrives to his assigned country? How will he know what to do?

Upon arrival in the country of assignment project staff will meet volunteers in the airport. They are taken to a predetermined site for several days of orientation to the country and additional technical training before going with their partners to the community where they will work.

21. Are all assignments rural?

AMIGOS works with host organizations to assess local health needs and the capabilities of the volunteers. According to this assessment, AMIGOS volunteers are placed primarily in rural areas, but some volunteers may be placed in urban and semi-urban communities.

22. Is there insurance protection for my child in case of illness?

Volunteers are required to have adequate health insurance during the training and Latin American project assignment. While volunteers are in Latin America, AMIGOS pays for minor medical expenses, up to \$100 total (i.e., physician visits & medications). In case of greater expenses, AMIGOS will seek reimbursement from the volunteer's primary health insurance carrier and/or the volunteer's family. AMIGOS purchases supplemental short-term medical insurance that is intended for extreme emergency situations, such as medical evacuation.

23. Is sexual assault a problem in Latin America? How does AMIGOS deal with the issue of sexual assault?

Statistically, volunteers are at a greater risk of being assaulted on a college campus than while in their Latin American community. However, just as in the United States, sexual assault does occur in Latin America. AMIGOS views sexual assault as a serious issue, which requires immediate and unequivocal support from the organization. Volunteers participate in personal health/safety training, including sexual assault awareness, prior to departure. This training provides life-long skills in assault awareness and prevention. It is imperative that volunteers promptly and completely report assaults to their project staff in order to receive assistance. AMIGOS provides 24 hour on-call support to all project staffs. The on-call support includes an International Office staff member, the AMIGOS Medical Director, a rape crisis counselor and an adolescent mental health professional.

24. Why Pay to Volunteer?

The benefits of volunteering through a well-established placement organization include:

- Orientation: Pre-departure, on-site, and language and technical training.
- Arranged accommodations: A supportive and caring home stay environment provides an important connection to the culture and a first-hand view of social and political events in the country.
- A Safety Net: 24 hour staff to provide logistical and emotional support.
- Clear Expectations: The volunteer's responsibilities are clear and well defined.
- Affordability: It is more cost effective to go through a program than on your own.