

Guidance for Conducting Focus Groups

As discussed in *Community Assessment and Monitoring Results and Activities* (Modules 4 and 8)

Focus groups are an information gathering tool which gathers opinions, perceptions, thoughts, evaluations, emotional responses, and feedback from organized groups of people regarding a particular issue. It is intended to enhance understanding, insight, and knowledge regarding one or more issues. For example, to understand challenges of military spouses in a local community, an effective way would be to gather 5-8 military spouses for a focus group. Below are guidelines on conducting focus groups.

Prior to Conducting a Focus Group:

1. Decide who should be in the focus group, (ideally, those that represent the issue(s) you hope to understand better). Also think through:
 - a. What questions do we need answered?
 - b. Who will lead the group and facilitate the focus group?
 - c. How will information be recorded (a co-facilitator using video, audio, or note taking)?
2. Determine a meeting space that provides privacy and comfort – an environment that helps the participants feel safe enough to openly share their experiences and perceptions.
3. Invite potential focus group participants to get involved. Be upfront about the purpose and time commitment of the focus group.

Template for Guiding a Focus Group

Make introductions and set ground rules:

To set the tone of a focus group, start by inviting people to introduce themselves. Not only will this help people get to know one another, it will also help make others more comfortable. Remind participants that they are the experts on this topic and their feedback is crucial. It is important to respect each individual's view and opinion about topics. Lastly, set ground rules and take care of administrative tasks (which are rules, how the information is recorded, and how the information will be used after the focus group). In doing this, be clear about the agenda of the interview at the beginning. Consider the following agenda: *Welcome and introductions, review of the reason for the focus group, goals for the meeting, review of ground rules, questions, answers, and wrap-up.*

State purpose and intentions:

Next, state the objectives of the focus group and the reason for asking them to meet. (For example, “the objective of this focus group is to collect useful information about the challenges

of military spouses-which will inform future programs for military families”). Explain to participants how information is being recorded (video, audio, no names will be mentioned in final reports etc.). Answer any questions participants may have about the interview process.

Ask primary questions:

During the primary part of the focus group, craft and ask questions that are open-ended and allow the participant to explain in detail about the topic of interest. Through treating each participant with respect and accepting responses with respect, discussion will be further facilitated around the answers provided. It is necessary to continue to probe (e.g., explore further) if no one is getting involved in the discussion. It is also important to ensure that everyone participates by allowing each member to share their views and opinions. If others are having difficulty speaking up or voicing their opinions, use the round-table approach by going around the table for everyone’s feedback.

Probe and re-state responses:

After each response, briefly summarize what individuals said and make sure each person has an opportunity to clarify comments or answers. When appropriate, steer conversations away from group debates, especially debates that pivot around why one point-of-view is superior.

Assess and clarify:

Once the discussion ends and everyone explains their views, summarize what was said. In other words, summarize the main points shared by group members. Ensure that all participants played an active role and had an opportunity to respond to the summary. Allow time for group members to clarify anything in the summary or offer additional observations from their perspective.

Make final comments and end the session:

End the focus group by summarizing what has been accomplished and allow time for group members to clarify anything in the summary or offer additional observations from their perspective. Repeat how the information will be used and thank the participants for their time and expertise. Then at this time, adjourn the meeting. Consider having a time for socializing around refreshments.

References

- Communities in Blue (n.d.). *How to conduct focus groups [PowerPoint Slides]*. Retrieved from *Communities in Blue* website: <https://www.communitiesinblue.org/>
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. (4th ed.). London: Sage Publications Inc.

Additional Resources on Focus Groups:

- Krueger, R.A. (n.d.) Focus group interviewing. Retrieved from <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~rkrueger/focus.html>
- McNamara, C. (n.d.). Basics of Conducting Focus Groups. Retrieved from <http://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/focus-groups.htm>
- Morgan, D. L. (1998). *The focus group guidebook*. California: Sage.