Section 7: Conducting Focus Groups

Purpose

The purpose of this tool is to provide you with basic steps for planning and conducting focus groups to guide refinements in your educational programs, outreach activities, and/or services.

Focus groups are small discussion groups that are used to collect in-depth insights about a particular population and/or topic area. They are unique because they can provide rich data as a result of the group dynamics and interactions that occur among the participants during the group discussions.

Focus groups can be used to help with:

- Program planning (e.g., assessing program needs);
- Program development (e.g., testing selected program or service strategies);
- Development of health education materials (e.g., identify need for materials, key messages, design, layout, reactions to sample materials); and
- Program evaluation (e.g., determining participants' awareness of or reaction to selected programs or services).

OFP-funded agencies have used focus groups to explore the topics listed below. These ideas might help you decide how to use the focus group tool to meet your needs.

Note: **These are just suggestions. Be sure to identify topics that are of interest and importance to your agency.**

- Gather teen reactions to clinic services
- Determine ways of increasing community awareness and facilitating access to clinical services for teens
- Get reactions to improve teen pregnancy prevention theatrical performance
- Test male-centered marketing materials
- Seek input on new teen pregnancy prevention presentations and programs
- Understand student use of services provided at a school health center
- Determine ways to increase participation in current programs and identify potential barriers to participation
- Get reactions to adult parenting classes

Overview of Steps for this Tool

To use this tool, you will need to:

1. Determine how you will use the focus group tool
2. Plan your groups
3. Prepare Parent Consent and Participant Assent (**must get approval from Evaluation Liaison/OFP Program Consultant**)
4. Review Focus Group Protocol Elements
5. Develop your focus group questions (**must get approval from Evaluation Liaison/OFP Program Consultant**)
6. Conduct the 2-3 focus groups with 6-10 participants in each group
7. Analyze the data
8. Report your findings

Materials for this Section

🗣*Note*: **Materials provided are resources only, and can be used as needed.**

- Focus Group Topic Areas and Sample Questions to Illustrate Areas (Appendix 7A)
- Steps to Complete Tool Checklist (Appendix 7B)
- Sample Recruitment Flyer (Appendix 7C)
- Site Logistics (Appendix 7D)
- Sample Parent Consent and Participant Assent Forms (Appendix 7E)
- Sample Focus Group Protocol (Appendix 7F)
- Sample Sign-In Sheet (Appendix 7G)
- Facilitation Guidelines for Focus Group Moderator (Appendix 7H)
- Focus Group Preparation Checklist (Appendix 7I)
- Sample Focus Group Note Guide (Appendix 7J)
- Sample Focus Group Coding Worksheet (Appendix 7K)
- Sample Focus Group Summaries (Appendix 7L)

Step 1 Decide How You Will Use the Focus Group Tool

Determine What You Want to Know

An important first step is clarifying what you want to learn from your focus groups. For CPI purposes, you are encouraged to think broadly across your workplan to identify any aspects of your program that you would like to explore.

To help with this step, ask yourself the following:

- **Purpose**: What do we want to know? What is the nature of the problem or issue of interest? What kinds of information do we need to help refine our program or services?
- **Participants**: From whom do we want to learn this information? What are their characteristics? Are there sub-populations within the larger populations? Do the focus groups need to be conducted in a language other than English?
- **Data use**: How do we want to use the information? Who wants the information? Is this data appropriate for our needs?

Multiple Uses of Focus Groups

You do not need to limit the use of this tool to your prevention education or outreach strategies. As mentioned on page 7-1, OFP-funded agencies used the focus group tool to explore many different topic areas. You can use focus groups for a variety of purposes, such as:

- Exploring needs among a population of interest (e.g., service needs of young Latino fathers).
- Understanding issues (e.g., factors that influence selected behaviors, such as whether or not individuals seek services).

- Seeking input on program plans or service ideas.
- Generating new program and/or service ideas.
- Testing out program materials or sessions (e.g., curriculum, media and health materials, brochures, role plays, videos).
- Identifying strengths, weaknesses and recommendations for programs and services provided.
- Pilot testing survey instruments.
- Collecting insights that might assist with interpretation of survey data.

Focus groups may be conducted in schools or other venues such as community centers, health care clinics or other locations where you serve your participants. Additionally, your focus groups may be conducted with non-participants, such as teens not in your programs, teachers, program/clinic staff or parents.

Appendix 7A includes a list of potential topics and sample questions to assist you in refining or clarifying what you may want to learn by using focus groups.

Are Focus Groups the Right Approach?

To help you decide if this tool meets your needs, review these general guidelines on appropriate and inappropriate uses for focus groups.

Appropriate when you want to …	Not appropriate when you…
• Learn from interaction among participants • Explore and get in-depth and nuances of opinions • Understand differences in perspectives • Understand what factors influence opinions or behaviors • Test materials or products • Test reactions to actual or proposed services • Design or understand the results of a large quantitative study • Capture comments of the target audience	• Want people to come to consensus • Need to ask participants sensitive questions • Want to educate people • Want to generalize findings to a larger population • Are working with emotionally or politically charged groups • Want to measure program effectiveness

Your Level of Focus Group Experience

Each agency has program staff with varying levels of experience conducting focus groups. This tool was created to guide someone with no experience through the focus group process. If your agency has program staff with extensive focus groups experience you may not need to spend as much time reviewing the step-by-step instructions. For those of you with experience planning and conducting focus groups, we have prepared a checklist to assist you with the activities and steps required to complete this tool (refer to Appendix 7B). You may also want to discuss your agency's focus group experience with your Evaluation Liaison to determine the most efficient way to utilize this tool.

Summary

Once you have determined that focus groups are the best approach for your needs, you are ready to start planning for your focus group. Ask yourself: *What do we want to learn? Is a focus group approach the best way to learn this? What is our agency's collective level of experience?*

Step 2 Plan Your Groups

Determine Who Will be Invited

As noted in Step 1, the purpose of the focus group (or what you want to learn from the focus group) determines who should be invited. For example, if you want to learn more about the best locations to reach adolescents through outreach programs, then you would want to talk with adolescents. Be sure to also think about "hard to reach" populations, for example adolescents who need services but don't go to clinics. This may impact your recruitment strategies and time to locate these individuals.

In general, you will want to recruit people who share some important characteristic (e.g. age, race/ethnicity, geographic region), but who do not necessarily know each other well.

Determine How Many People You Need to Invite

Ideally you want to include from 6-10 individuals per focus group, but you can run a focus group with as few as 4 people and as many as 10 or 12. Larger groups are NOT better. With bigger groups you may find that fewer people actually contribute to the conversation.

To ensure you will have groups of 6-8 people, you should invite from 10-12 individuals, as some people may not be able to attend. If it turns out that you invite 12 and everybody attends, you might try splitting the group in half randomly and treating it as 2 separate groups. NOTE: Only do this if you have the resources to do so and if the note taker has the skills to moderate the second group. If not, then take participants' contact information and consider rescheduling a second group. Most importantly, plan for the unexpected.

Determine How Many Groups to Hold

In general, you will want to conduct several focus groups so that you can look for similarities and insights across groups. A common rule of thumb is to conduct at least 3 groups, or continue until you reach a point of 'saturation.' **Saturation means that you are starting to hear the same kinds of information from your groups.** If you are still getting new information after 3 groups, you should conduct more groups.

If you want to be able to compare results of various subpopulations, such as male groups versus female groups, you would need to include enough groups of each of these subpopulations so that you feel confident that you have 'heard' what each of the subgroups had to say.

For CPI purposes, you will:

- Conduct 2 – 3 focus groups. You are welcome to conduct more groups if you wish, but you are not required to do so.
- Invite 10-12 participants for each group assuming that 6-8 participants may show up the day of the focus groups.

Determine How Long Your Focus Groups Will Be

Ideally you should allow 1 hour to 1.5 hours for a focus group. If you are planning to conduct your focus groups in a school setting you may only be able to get 45 minutes. You will need to plan your protocol/questions accordingly.

Think Again About Participants and Groups

Once you are clear on your focus group topic and you have a sense of who you want to invite, you need to think again about whether it would be ideal to create smaller sub-groups of participants.

- For example, it is not usually a good idea to mix language groups, so you would need to hold separate focus groups if this was an issue for your site, even if you weren't planning on analyzing results separately for these groups.

- Similarly, if you wanted to conduct focus groups with younger youth (e.g., middle school) and discuss reproductive health issues you might want to hold separate groups for boys and girls to encourage more discussion.

The main factor to consider when thinking about the need for sub-groups is how mixing participants may affect the conversation. If you feel mixed groups may hamper discussion, it is best to hold separate groups.

Decide Who Will Recruit Your Participants

Think about the individuals you would like to have in your focus groups and who would be best to recruit them (e.g., a teacher, peer educators, school staff, community leaders, clinic staff, project coordinator, etc.). This recruiter may not necessarily be the moderator of the focus group.

It is important that the initial contact with participants be from someone the participants know and trust. For example, a peer educator or project coordinator may be the best person to invite youth to take part in a focus group because they already know each other. Or, at a clinic, a clinic staff person who has contact with clients might be the ideal person rather than someone who is not known in the clinic.

To help your recruitment process, it may be useful to create guidelines. These recruitment guidelines could include:

- A description of the characteristics of the population you would like to invite (e.g., Male teen clients ages 14-18 at Clinic Z).

- Screening questions to help the recruiters determine if a potential participant meets the population requirements.

- A brief pre-written script to help recruiters describe the project and purpose of the group to participants.

- A schedule of when the focus groups will be held.

If people express an interest in attending but do not meet the criteria you have set out, thank them, and record their contact information if you think you may want to include them in future groups.

Allow Time for Recruitment and Develop Recruitment Materials

Depending on the target group and topic, it may be difficult to reach potential participants. Give yourself plenty of lead time ***(at least 3 weeks)*** for recruitment.

In most cases, you will already have direct access to potential participants who fit the characteristics of your particular group (e.g., through a school-based program or clinic). In other cases, you may want to hold groups with a population you do not currently serve to explore ways to expand your program efforts.

- Preparing a flyer that describes the purpose, date, location and incentive for participating in the group can assist you in recruiting (refer to Appendix 7C for a Sample Recruitment Flyer). If you are working with youth, you also will need to include a parental consent form (see next section).

- You may need to use different methods to distribute your recruitment materials depending on the population you are trying to reach (e.g., through classroom teachers, at a clinic, through peer outreach workers, etc.).

Use Strategies to Encourage Participation

Do not assume that just because participants have agreed to take part that they will actually show up to the focus group on the right day and time. There are a number of strategies you can use to encourage participation:

Note: **Discuss the type and appropriateness of incentives for participants with program staff.**

- Enlist a community leader or other trusted individual to recruit initially and/or conduct reminder calls; this individual could be invited to greet participants the day of the group as well.

- Offer incentives for participation and remind participants of this in the recruitment materials.

- Provide snacks/food.
- Give out a door prize.
- Hold the focus groups before or after another well-attended event.

Choose a Site

You will need to find a site to conduct your focus groups. In general, it is important to choose a site that is neutral and comfortable for participants, and one that will be conducive to hearing and recording the conversation. There are several logistics to keep in mind when choosing a focus group site (refer to Appendix 7D for more details):

- **Location** (centrally located or well known to participants and one that is safe for participants to attend).
- **Room-set-up** (easy to move tables and chairs for discussion; few distractions in room; good acoustics; not too big or too small for the number of participants).
- **Food** (snacks or food that can be eaten easily and that don't create too much noise when eaten).
- **Child care** (provide as needed depending on your participants' needs).
- **Transportation** (provide bus passes or other transportation if possible to facilitate participation).

Summary

By completing this step you should have your topic selected, your population identified, and your groups planned. *Ask yourself: Who do we want to include in our groups? Where can we find these participants? What kind of consent and assent processes do I need to complete?*

Step 3 Parent Consent and Participant Assent

Determine Parent Notification/Consent Requirements

If you decide to conduct your groups with minor adolescents (under 18) you may need to secure parental consent for their participation. Parents should be informed of the following:

- the general nature of the group;
- when and where it will be held;
- how long it will last;
- what incentives (if any) will be provided; and
- that participation is voluntary.

Parents should be provided information in the language they feel most comfortable with to ensure their understanding of the purpose of the group. They also should be given the name and number of a contact person in case they want more information.

You are responsible for determining local Education Codes, laws and community standards regarding parental notification for your focus group setting. We have provided some general guidelines to assist you below.

School- Based or Community Setting

If you are in a school-based setting, check with the site administrator for the rules around parental consent. If you are in a community setting, discuss parent notification requirements with the director of the community agency in which you are providing services.

Juvenile Justice Facility

Agencies working with incarcerated youth or foster care youth are encouraged to follow established procedures for obtaining parent/guardian consent.

Community Clinic

If you work in a clinic setting and you feel that securing parent consent to participate in a focus group may put youth at risk for linking them to the clinic, and having their parents find out that they are using the clinic, then you may wish to waive the parental consent. Discuss this with your Clinic/Program Director and OFP consultant.

Active or Passive Parent Consent?

The need for parental consent (either active or passive) depends on the setting of your focus groups. You will need to work directly with the school or community agency from which you would be recruiting youth to determine if you need to use active or passive consent.

- *Passive Consent*– means that you provide parents with information about the focus group before you conduct it. Parents can choose to opt their child out of the focus group by returning a signed form denying permission. Participants can take part in the focus group **unless** they returned a signed parent permission form marked NO.
- *Active Consent* – means you **must** have a signature from each parent authorizing the youth's participation. A participant may **not** take part in the focus group unless there is a signed permission form. Any participant whose parent did not return a signed permission form may **not** take part in the focus group.

Note: **We recommend that at a minimum, you use passive parental consent for focus groups with youth in out of school settings.**

Obtaining parental consent, even when it is not required, is a good practice and can help to maintain important relationships (sense of trust, etc.) that have been built within communities. We have provided examples of both active and passive consent forms in Appendix 7E for your use.

If you already use a parent consent form for your program you may be able to simply add a few sentences about the focus group.

Participant Assent (☑ REQUIRED)

All individuals (youth and adults) who take part in your focus groups must sign a participant assent form before the group starts. This is separate from obtaining parent consent and does not replace parental consent.

Assent forms provide an opportunity for you to tell your participants (youth and adults) what is involved with taking part in the focus group and any risks or benefits they may experience by taking part. This is one step to ensure your participants have the information they need to make an informed decision about participating in the focus group.

We have provided you with sample participant assent forms in Appendix 7E. We recommend that you use the language provided ***as is*** and only modify the information that is relevant for your program. Your Evaluation Liaison and Program Consultant are available to review your versions.

You will need to make 2 copies of the assent form per person to take to the focus group. Participants will be asked to sign one copy and turn it in to you for your records. The second copy is for them to keep.

You should incorporate the assent form text into your focus group protocol and read it aloud during the introduction. The sample protocol provided in Appendix 7F shows how this can be done to minimize repetition.

Consent and Assent Process Overview

It may be helpful to frame this consent and assent process in the following way:

- If you are working with youth under 18 it is a *two-step process*.
    1. You must obtain parent permission (consent). Follow procedures for active or passive parental notification based on the setting that you are working in (see above).

2. You must obtain youth assent. Follow procedures provided for preparing and obtaining youth assent.

- If you are working with participants 18 years and older it is a *one-step process*.
  1. You must obtain participant assent. Use the same “Participant Assent” form.

Have Your Parent Consent and/or Participant Assent Forms Approved

(☑ Required)

Once you have finished modifying your consent and assent forms you **must** have them reviewed and approved by your Evaluation Liaison and OFP Program Consultant.

Summary

After completing this step you should know which parental consent process you need to follow. Ask yourself: *Have I modified my consent and/or assent forms? Have they been reviewed and approved by my Evaluation Liaison and OFP Program Consultant?*

Step 4 Review Focus Group Protocol Elements

Adapt Your Protocol

This step is intended to provide an overview of the focus group protocol elements. In Step 4 you will be guided through developing your focus group questions using these elements.

The focus group protocol – sometimes called the discussion or moderator's guide– is your data collection instrument.

One way to think about a focus group protocol is to have a "gentle" opening and closing, which brackets a more substantive discussion in the middle. The goal is to ease people into a discussion where they feel comfortable talking about the topics you want to hear about. A focus group protocol may cover these elements:

- Welcome
- Participant Assent
- Group Agreements
- Introductions
- Warm-up/Opening Questions
- Main Questions
- Closing

Review the sample protocol containing these elements in Appendix 7F. A detailed description of each element is provided below.

Welcome

The *welcome* is key--it sets the tone for the entire discussion. It is not uncommon for participants to feel a little nervous, especially if they have not done this before. They may fear saying the wrong thing, or

Welcome (cont.)

worry about contributing in a meaningful way. The welcome is an opportunity to reassure participants and let them know what to expect.

In your protocol you should address the following as part of the welcome:

- A brief description of the project – why you've gathered everyone together, what the participants have in common, and how you will use the data. The amount of detail you use depends on your population.
- If you are taping the discussion, explain that you are doing so – and that the purpose is just to get an accurate record of what was said, because it's hard to take comprehensive notes when people are speaking fast.
- Whether you are taping or taking notes, explain that no results will be reported by name.
- Remind participants that they are participating voluntarily, that their comments are being recorded (but are confidential), and that they may choose not to answer questions if they wish.
- Provide a reassurance that there are no right or wrong answers – that you are truly interested in their opinions.
- Provide a separate reassurance that the group does not have to agree or reach any kind of consensus. Note that you want to hear different opinions, and that all comments are helpful, both positive and negative.
- Remind participants of the time frame (e.g., we'll have you out of here by 3:00 p.m.).
- Give an explanation of the moderator's role (described in greater detail in Step 6, but basically that the moderator is there to move the discussion along).

- Indicate the language that will be used during the focus group discussion and ask if participants prefer to use another language.

Group Agreements

Group agreements or ground rules should be set at the beginning of the focus group. They give the moderator a tool on which to fall back if participants are disruptive in any way. Sometimes the group agreements are covered as part of the welcome. Here is a list of some common group agreements you might use:

- Speak clearly and one at a time (so that comments can be recorded).
- There are no right or wrong answers – just opinions from which we can learn.
- No personal attacks – everyone has a right to an opinion.
- We want to hear from everyone and have lots to cover—we may need to cut off some discussions to ensure we accomplish this goal.
- We ask you to respect this confidentiality to assure that everything that is said in this room stays in this room.

Introductions

Introductions can be very brief – such as first name, and grade or school attending, etc. It is a good idea to have name tents or name tags (so that the moderator can call on participants by name). Including introductions is a good way to start because it gives every participant the "practice" of speaking out loud in front of the group, which may be harder for some people than for others.

It's often useful to ask participants a non-threatening question that is unrelated to the topic, but which all of them can answer, for example, 'What is your favorite food?' 'What is one activity you enjoy doing in your spare time?' The goal is to have fun, set participants at ease, and give them some practice and comfort speaking up. Avoid questions that elicit status responses (e.g., job titles, educational background, grades in school), as these may make some participants feel less comfortable sharing their views. The moderator and note taker should participate in the introduction.

Warm-up/Opening Questions

Warm-up, or opening, questions are easy questions that begin to set the context for the remainder of the discussion. These are usually general questions related to the topic but are not your most critical questions. The goal is to set the groundwork, and get participants into, the topic at hand. You want to make sure all participants are on the same page when you get to your key questions.

- *Example 1: What are the names of some clinics or doctors in your community where teens can get free health care or reproductive health services?*
- *Example 2: What could motivate a teenager to become a peer educator?*
- *Example 3: Tell us about the kinds of advertising you see in your neighborhood. What do you think works well with teens?*

Warm-up questions are less critical—the main purpose of a warm up question is to ease participants toward your main questions.

Main Questions

As a general guideline, and for CPI purposes, we recommend that you plan on having about 5 to 6 questions total in your protocol (this is discussed in much more detail below). If your time is restricted you will need to reduce the number of questions you ask.

Count on asking between 2 and 5 main questions about your topic, building from general to specific. Resist the temptation to ask a lot of questions.

Some good examples include:

- *Thinking back on your experiences, tell me some of the characteristics of the clinic staff that you interacted with?*
- *What types of services are provided/needed? What do you see as a challenge to accessing health services for teens?*
- *What types of support do most teens need to access services?*
- *What do you think other teens <u>want</u> to know about preventing pregnancy?*
- *What are some of the key issues parents face in raising adolescents?*

Wrap-up/Summary Question

To help summarize the discussion, you can use a wrap-up question. Consider a question like this: "If you had just one minute to tell [Oprah, the Governor, teachers, parents, etc.] what you think is needed to … (e.g. prevent teen pregnancies) what would it be?"

Closing

Allow some time – up to 10 minutes – to wrap up the focus group discussion. Try to summarize key points that were shared during the discussion, and ask whether anyone has anything else to add. Have resources on hand to direct participants to more information as appropriate (e.g., referrals to FPACT, information about Medi-Cal eligibility and services, information on clinics/doctors in the area, etc.).

Thank everyone for participating and for helping you learn about the topic at hand. If you are providing incentives or offering class credit for participation, this is the time to provide the incentives. It is also a time to have participants sign that they participated in the focus group. (See Appendix 7G for a sample sign-in sheet.)

Summary

Now that you have reviewed all of the elements that make a focus group protocol, you are ready to develop your questions. Ask yourself: *Who needs to be involved in the development of this protocol?*

Step 5 Develop Your Focus Group Questions

Create Your Focus Group Questions

As discussed in Step 4, you will need to develop 1-2 warm up or opening questions, 5-6 main questions, and a wrap up question to include in your protocol. This step provides guidelines to help you create those questions.

Because agencies vary tremendously in what they would like to learn from their focus groups, we have only included a limited number of sample topic areas and questions with this tool to assist you in creating your own (refer to Appendix 7A). You can also discuss your plans with your Evaluation Liaison if you would like more help in developing your questions.

Include these Characteristics of Good Questions

Developing good questions requires time and thought. This step provides some general guidelines to assist you in this process. In general, focus group questions should be:

- *open-ended* to encourage conversation.
- *clear* so that the participants understand what is being asked.
- *short* and to the point--lengthy questions may be confusing to participants.
- *easy* to say so that the moderator does not stumble with words or phrases.
- *conversational* in nature to create a relaxed, informal environment.
- *free of acronyms, jargon or technical terms* that your group may not know.

Your questions should flow from simple to more complex. This can help participants to feel more comfortable responding from the start of the focus group. Elicit feedback from program staff and have them review for clarity and language.

Use Open-Ended Questions

Make sure the questions you create are open-ended – this means they can't be answered with just one word, like "yes" or "no."

Open-ended questions get people talking. They push for thoughts, feelings, influences, and attributes – the reasons why someone reacted a certain way. Here are examples of open-ended questions contrasted with a question that is "closed" (one that would lead to very short responses).

- ☺ **More effective**: *Please describe the clinic's services.*
- ☹ **Less effective**: *Do you know about the clinic's services?*
- ☺ **More effective**: *What typically happens when people your age need condoms?*
- ☹ **Less effective**: *Do you use condoms?*

Make Sure Questions Are Clear, Simple, and One-Dimensional

Keep questions as simple as possible, so that people can remember them and respond instinctively. The questions also should be one-dimensional – that is, they should focus on one concept. If you have two related concepts, ask them as separate questions.

- ☺ **More effective**: *What message from the teen theater show was most important for you? What made it important?*
- ☹ **Less effective**: *What was the most important message from the teen theater show and why did you remember it?*

It is also important to make sure your questions are neutral and do not suggest a desired answer.

- ☺ **More effective**: *What would help you feel welcome at the clinic? Who at the clinic can help you feel welcome?*
- ☹ **Less effective**: *What made you feel welcome at the clinic and who helped make that happen?*

Avoid Asking 'Why?'

Avoid using 'why' questions. Asking 'why' can put people on the defensive, and can make them feel as if they have to have a rational answer or have a defense for their answer.

- ☺ **More effective**: *What are some of the benefits of using clinic X?*
- ☹ **Less effective**: *Why do you use clinic X instead of clinic Y?*
- ☺ **More effective**: *What did you like best about the presentation today?*
- ☹ **Less effective**: *Why did you like the presentation?*

Start with Positive Questions

It is best to start with positive questions first to promote discussion. For example, if you were interested in asking about challenges and benefits of being involved in a particular program or having access to clinical services, start with the questions on benefits, then turn to the questions on challenges. Leading with the positive can help create a more conducive environment for encouraging dialogue within the group, as participants may feel reluctant to appear critical at the outset of the discussion.

Create a List of Probing Questions

It is important to keep some "probe" questions ready, in case the discussion stalls or you need more information. But use the probes sparingly, and only where you really do need more detail about something, as over-using them can feel repetitious.

Examples of probes are:

- What made you feel that way?
- Would you explain that a little more?
- Can you give me an example of that?
- Has anyone else experienced something similar/different?

Once you have created your focus group questions, elicit feedback from other program staff and have them review for clarity and language.

Have Your Protocol Approved

(☑ Required)

Once you finish your protocol, you **must** have it reviewed and approved by your Evaluation Liaison and OFP Consultant. **You should send the protocol to them before you practice it.**

Practice Your Protocol and Revise As Needed

(☑ Required)

Once you have your protocol approved, it is important to plan time to practice using it. There are several strategies that can be used to do this, including:

- Practice the protocol with a few people (2-3) similar to your planned participants.
- Try it out on a small group of colleagues.

Work with your Evaluation Liaison to determine which practice strategy best meets your needs.

Practice testing gives you the opportunity to:

- 'hear' the questions out loud,
- identify unclear questions,

- determine if the questions are yielding the desired information, and
- approximate how long the focus group might take.

Additionally, If you plan to conduct your focus groups in languages other than English, it is a good idea to have the facilitator pilot test with a small group that speaks the language to make sure the discussion guide is clear.

Revise Again, Get Approval

(☑ Required)

After practicing the protocol and completing any refinements, resubmit the revised protocol to your Evaluation Liaison and Program Consultant for final approval.

Summary

Now that you have developed your protocol, you are ready to conduct your focus group. *Ask yourself: Is my protocol ready to be used? Has the protocol been approved and has the facilitator practiced the final version out loud?*

Step 6 Conduct the Groups

Decide Who Will Be the Moderator

🗣*Note*: **When possible avoid using someone associated with your program as the moderator. This may bias the responses from your participants. For example; the health educator who presents the information.**

The moderator's role is to facilitate the group's discussion. This means giving everyone an opportunity to speak, managing the discussion so that all the key topics are covered, and using good judgment to pursue probes or tangents that might yield additional or new useful information.

Good moderators offer a combination of personal qualities and group facilitation skills. You do not need to hire a professional moderator, but you should find a volunteer or staff member who has a particularly comfortable style. Some qualities to look for include:

- Knowledge of group dynamics and experience working with groups (e.g., running meetings, leading training events or support groups, etc.);
- Skilled at speaking and understanding the language in which the focus group will be conducted;
- Group facilitation skills;
- Listening skills;
- Cultural competence and credibility with the focus group participants. It is essential that the participants feel comfortable with the moderator. Sometimes you may need to use a moderator that the participants know or who is from an agency that they trust; and at other times participants may be more comfortable opening up to someone that they do not know.
- Excellent communication skills;

- Ability to think and respond quickly, and not be flustered by departures from “the script;”
- Ability and willingness to let others take center stage;
- Commitment to the goals and philosophy of your program; and
- Openness to new information and ideas.

Moderator Qualities

Like any good facilitator, the moderator should be neutral about the *content* of the discussion, but very committed to the *process*. Remaining neutral during a discussion can be difficult, but is essential. A skilled moderator avoids reacting too much – e.g., nodding or frowning, saying “Great!” or other comments that imply judgment. At the same time, the moderator must be very alert to participants’ body language – especially among participants who are not speaking up. For example, to draw out a quiet person who is nodding, the moderator might say, “John, I see that you are nodding. Have you had an experience similar to Juanita’s? Could you tell us about it?” (Drawing out shy people is the one exception to keeping a neutral expression as much as possible, because the moderator may want to encourage such a person with a smile.)

The moderator also needs to be skilled at controlling extraneous conversation and making sure everyone has a chance to be heard. The focus group agreements list (in Step 4), described earlier, is a helpful ally for the moderator. If too many people are having side conversations or speaking at once, for example, the moderator can refer back to the group agreements without alienating the participants.

Have Moderator Practice the Protocol Before the Focus Group

(☑ Strongly Suggested)

Moderators should be very familiar with the protocol and memorize as much of it as possible, so they can pay attention to facilitating the group, not reading the protocol.

Once you have a final version of the focus group protocol, it is important for the moderator to practice reading the questions <u>out loud</u> several times with the note taker(s) prior to the focus groups.

🗣*Note*: **During focus groups it is not appropriate to "teach" or "correct" misinformation. If a participant says something incorrect it is not up to the moderator to correct it.**

Finally, it's important that group moderators fully understand the objectives of the groups they are facilitating so that they can determine when questions aren't working and a new line of questioning is needed, when discussions are relevant and not relevant to the desired information, and where and how to make cuts when time is running short.

Appendix 7H includes helpful guidelines for facilitating the group. Appendix 7I includes a preparation checklist of important reminders to do prior to conducting the focus group.

Identify a Note Taker

Usually, there is so much to do in a focus group session that it takes two people to handle everything – especially during the crucial early minutes of a discussion, when rapport and comfort are established. If possible, select someone to serve as assistant moderator, also known as a note taker. Generally, a note taker has the following role:

- Helps with equipment and refreshments
- Arranges room
- Welcomes participants as they arrive
- Takes notes during discussion
- Operates the tape recorder
- Asks clarifying questions during the discussion, but does not take part in the discussion
- Gives an oral summary at the end of the group
- Debriefs with moderator after the group
- Gives feedback on analysis and report

🗣*Note*: **If too many participants show up for one group, you may need to split the group in two. The note taker should also have the skills necessary for and be prepared to moderate a second focus group.**

Plan to have an extra tape recorder/note taking guide. If this situation happens, each facilitator will need to be prepared to take notes and facilitate the group.

Be Prepared to Deal with Difficult Situations

Any group, no matter how small or cohesive, may yield at least one difficult situation for the moderator. Anticipating different types of situations and being prepared to address different types of personalities in your group will help you moderate the group and stay focused on the questions. In your group you might experience the following personalities:

- Rude person
- Dominating person
- Shy, quiet person
- Rambling person

Appendix 7H provides guidelines for handling some of these common challenges that arise during focus groups.

Record Your Data

🗣*Note*: **It is helpful to do a sound check with your tape recorder before the beginning of the group. You can record the date and location of the focus group as a test and then this information will be included in the session.**

Because focus groups are guided conversations, it is ideal to tape record the discussion and then transcribe the tapes.

If it is not possible to professionally transcribe the tapes, it is still worth taping the discussion and listening to the tapes afterwards to help you remember what was said.

It is also a good idea to have a note taker (as described earlier). This ensures you have a back up to the tape recorder just in case it fails or the sound quality is poor. Note takers should attempt to capture as much detail as possible. We have provided you with a sample note takers guide (refer to Appendix 7J). You may also develop your own note taking guide/format to meet your needs.

Debrief Immediately After Each Focus Group

Immediately after **each** focus group, the moderator and note taker(s) should:

- Check the tape recorder (if used) to make sure there was not a malfunction—if there was, spend more time reviewing notes.

🗣*Note*: **It is helpful to tape record the debrief sessions.**

- Conduct a debriefing session in which themes, surprises, and ideas that struck the facilitator and/or note taker(s) are noted on the spot.
- Make note of any key quotes that you might want to use in a report to illustrate an important theme or point.
- Label tapes with the date and location of the group.

Conduct Subsequent Focus Groups

As part of the CPI you are required to conduct 2-3 focus groups. Use the time following the first focus group to reflect on how it went and make adjustments as needed for subsequent groups.

Contact your Evaluation Liaison to discuss any questions or concerns that arise during this process.

Summary

By this point you should have identified a moderator and a note taker: *Ask yourself: Does the moderator have the key qualities needed to facilitate the groups? Are the moderator and note taker ready to facilitate?*

Step 7 Analyze the Data

Use a Systematic Data Analysis Process

One of the challenges of conducting focus groups is analyzing the data. It is much easier to analyze quantitative survey data than it is to analyze qualitative data from focus groups. Here are some steps you can follow to help you with the analysis process. There are also a number of resources available on conducting focus groups that can give you more details in this process (see last page, after Step 8).

Consider These Data Analysis Reminders

Some points to remember about analysis:

- The purpose of your focus group drives the analysis. Stick to your purpose and don't get overwhelmed by all the data.
- Look for big ideas—step back and review the data to identify 3 or 4 of the most important findings.
- The analysis should be systematic and deliberate. You should be able to explain how you analyzed the data in your CPI summary.

Be aware of your personal biases and opinions as you summarize the data! Remember, you are the voice of the participants; your task is to represent their views completely and accurately.

Transcribe or Review Your Tapes

If you tape recorded your focus group, it is ideal to have the tapes transcribed.

Here are some tips for transcribing/reviewing your tapes.

- Identify the speakers—indicate who is talking (the moderator, "M" or a participant, "P"). When possible, it's also helpful to label different participant responses (e.g., P1, P2, etc.). This allows the person reviewing the transcript to get a sense of the flow of the conversation. Do not label or identify by name.

- Number the lines of text to make it easier to find a specific comment or part of the transcript.

- Type the conversation **exactly as it happened**. Do not "edit" or change words used by participants. The words are your data--having them typed exactly as they were stated is important to capture the true nature of what was said during the group.

- Note any unusual occurrences such as laughter, loud voices, buzzers, etc. This gives the reader of the transcript a sense of the feeling within the group.

- Allow time to transcribe—it takes about 3 to 4 hours of time to transcribe one hour of conversation. It always takes longer than you think it will!

Prepare Data Highlights of Each Focus Group

In order to start the data analysis you will need to prepare focus group data highlights. Complete the following steps for each focus group conducted:

- Review the focus group tape recordings.

- Review the focus group notes (created by the moderator and note taker(s) shortly after each focus group).

- Prepare data highlights of each group in a question-by-question format, noting any key quotes that illustrate important points of view. One way to do this is by using a coding worksheet to organize themes and topics. (See Appendix 7K for a Sample Focus Group Coding Worksheet).

- Share the highlights with the note taker or another staff person who may have attended the focus group to verify that you've captured the conversation accurately.

Compare Data Highlights Across Focus Groups

Once you have completed the data highlights for each group you can then compare highlights across the focus groups.

- Compare and contrast views for each question.
- Look for consistent themes by question and overall.
- Look for differences across groups.
- Identify key quotes across the groups that capture the patterns.

Avoid counting responses—the purpose of focus groups is to capture rich discussion, not count how many people made a particular comment. You can use modifiers such as "a few," "many," or "all" to describe how many people expressed a certain point of view.

Data Analysis Pitfalls

Focus groups have some limitations in terms of analysis and require some finesse and caution when interpreting results.

- When analyzing focus group results, it is not appropriate to use counts and percents at all unless you are simply reporting the characteristics of your participants.
- In focus group research, the actual number of respondents is relatively small and outliers (i.e., atypical observations or minority viewpoints) are just as important (if not more so) than "majority" opinions.

Focus groups are not representative in the same way that samples drawn for surveys might be. Because participants are not selected randomly, they cannot be said to statistically "represent" any particular group. This doesn't mean that participants' insights are not valid or important, just that it is inappropriate to generalize from what participants say. For example, it is inappropriate to say “70% of the focus group participants said X, therefore 70% of clinic clients probably feel the same way.” (Using a survey with a representational sample, on the other hand, would allow you to make this type of generalization.)

Prepare CPI Summary

As a final step, prepare your CPI summary report of the findings that can be used by your agency to help you identify ways to refine your program and/or services. See Step 8 for more details on what to include in your CPI summary report. Appendix 7L includes several sample summaries.

Summary

As a result of this step, you should have a summary of your focus group results. Ask yourself: *What are the big ideas stemming from our focus groups?*

Step 8 Report Your Findings

Prepare CPI Summary

Prepare your *draft* CPI summary and submit the following to your Evaluation Liaison:

1. A copy of the focus group protocol you developed and had approved by your OFP Program Consultant and Evaluation Liaison.
2. *Draft* summary of your CPI results. The summary should address the following questions.
   - Who was involved in developing the focus group protocol?
   - What process was used to develop the protocol (e.g., did your site work as a group, how did you practice the protocol)?
   - What was the purpose/goal of your focus group?
   - Who participated in the focus group – describe the focus group participants, including how they were recruited and how many people took part.
   - What did you learn from the data you collected? Describe the results by question or by major themes. Include quotes to illustrate key themes or findings.
   - What changes are you most likely to make based on what you learned from the focus group data that you collected?

CPI Due Dates

Refer to Section 1, **CPI Requirements** (page 1-3) for CPI due dates and instructions for submitting your CPI *draft* summary and completed tools for review by your Evaluation Liaison.

Additional Resources for Conducting Focus Groups

1. Krueger, Richard A. & Casey, Mary Anne (2000) Focus Groups: A practical Guide for applied research, 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. www.sagepublications.com

2. Morgan, D. L. (1997). Focus groups as qualitative research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

3. Patton, M. Q. (1990). Qualitative evaluation and research methods. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.