Using Focus Groups to Enhance Your Evaluation

Healthcare Georgia Foundation
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Focus Groups – a tool for assessing an organization's services and structure. This publication, commissioned and disseminated by Healthcare Georgia Foundation, introduces the use of focus groups for evaluation purposes. In addition to evaluating a program, there are many other reasons an organization may want to conduct focus groups. While this publication will not be addressing those, we want to leave you with additional examples of when you might use focus groups:

- You want to understand the visibility of your organization as a whole. Does the public understand who you are, what you do, and why?

- Before evaluating a program's outcomes, you want to first assess the degree to which a program was implemented as planned, its fidelity. To what extent do program staff, clients, and volunteers agree on what was implemented, and the factors that led to changes along the way?

- After 10 years in operation, you want to know whether your nonprofit's governance structure and policies and procedures are effective, transparent, and culturally appropriate. Does the organization as a whole reflect stakeholder values? Does the governance structure inspire trust in leadership and convey quality in the services being offered?

- Your organization is considering investing in a new and somewhat controversial intervention to improve health outcomes for young mothers. Is there interest in and support for this intervention amongst your patient population?

As you are learning about the use of focus groups for evaluation, remember that focus groups can also be used to assess existing or potential services and structures of your organization.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Using Focus Groups to Enhance Your Evaluation, Maggie Jones, MPH, Elizabeth Carson-Cheng, MPH, Center for Community Health and Evaluation; and Nicole Lezin, consultant to CCHE, Healthcare Georgia Foundation, Publication #71, January 2013.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH AND EVALUATION

The Center for Community Health and Evaluation (CCHE) designs and provides evaluation services for health-related programs and initiatives throughout the United States. CCHE is part of the Group Health Research Institute in Seattle, WA.

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If you are like most health nonprofits, you have questions about how others perceive your organization and its programs. Some questions can be answered through methods such as surveys or interviews. Other questions, however, benefit from greater dialogue—a more in-depth discussion among those whose opinions and experiences you need to better understand.

Why are teens less interested in our services than before? What kind of changes would help to better engage them?

Which messages in our new educational campaign really hit home with our target audience, and why?

Our program wasn't as effective as we had hoped. How did participants experience it, and are there other factors that influenced their progress?

For questions like these, focus groups may be the answer.

This guide is intended for health nonprofits who may be interested in conducting focus groups to gain insights about their program or organization. It will help you determine whether focus groups are the most appropriate method, and will walk you through the steps to plan, conduct, analyze, and communicate the results from focus groups.

Throughout the guide, we offer some examples based on an immunization coalition's experience planning and conducting focus groups. Although the specific coalition is fictitious, the examples are drawn from actual experiences.

What are focus groups?

A focus group is a group interview of approximately 6-12 people who share similar characteristics or common interests. A focus group is more than a group conversation in that it has these characteristics:

- It answers specific evaluation questions or research objectives
- It follows a structured protocol or discussion guide
- It is guided by a trained, skilled moderator
- It includes a limited number of participants (ideally 6 to 8), selected because they share one or more specific characteristic

Focus groups use a combination of structure and informality to learn about what people think and feel about a specific topic.

- The structure – the "focus" – governs the content, scope, and sequence of questions that will be asked, as well as the size, composition, and logistics of the group itself.
- The informal part – the "group" – reflects the unique discussion that occurs when participants feel comfortable sharing their reactions (even if these are different from everyone else's).

Although there's a structure behind the focus group conversation, the discussion also has a natural flow and depth. It allows for detours and encourages some back-and-forth among participants to generate even more insights, while the presence of a trained and skilled moderator makes sure the conversation doesn't veer too far off track.

When should focus groups be used?

Focus groups can be very valuable in planning and evaluation efforts, but they are not always the best method to use. Focus groups are appropriate then you want to explore:

- In-depth information about a particular issue or topic;
- The range of perceptions and opinions about a particular issue or topic (rather than reach consensus on an issue); and/or
- Factors that influence opinions or behaviors.

"We decided to do a focus group because we wanted more detail and opinion than we got from our surveys. We were seeking information that did not necessarily fit into a yes/no survey or even a Likert scale. We wanted a dialogue instead of responses to canned questions."

– Grantee, Healthcare Georgia Foundation

Focus groups are good for learning about peoples' experiences and how those influence what they think and feel. In contrast to individual interviews, the group setting allows for brainstorming and can help trigger ideas otherwise dormant as people respond to and build on each other's comments. As a result, focus groups are often used to develop, test, and refine messages, and get ideas for program improvements. Focus groups can also be used to validate findings from other evaluation efforts.

Focus groups may not be the best method to use if discussing the topic in a group setting might make participants uncomfortable; they may be reluctant to share perceptions about sensitive or controversial issues in the presence of others. For example, in an area where there is a lot of stigma around HIV, holding a focus group to talk about community outreach for HIV testing might be difficult.

For other considerations about when to use a focus group see Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1: Considering when to use focus groups

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
• Group interaction can produce greater insight and in-depth discussion in specific topics • Can generate new ideas from group brainstorming • Allows understanding of factors that influence behavior and perceptions • Possible to collect multiple participants' input in one session • Allows for flexibility to follow up immediately on new ideas that emerge	• Can be logistically difficult and time intensive to coordinate • Requires skilled facilitator • A limited number of questions can be asked • Group setting may inhibit or influence opinions • Not appropriate for all topics or populations • Need to plan multiple groups if including multiple segments of the population • Results are not representative of the population as a whole

Planning your focus group

Focus groups allow you to hear from multiple people in a short period of time, but don't underestimate the time it takes to arrange a quality focus group—it requires finding the right location for an in-person meeting, recruiting appropriate participants, finding an effective facilitator, determining what you will ask and what you want to accomplish, and making sure other details and logistics are taken care of. This section highlights the steps to take to plan and prepare for your focus group(s)—a checklist is provided in Appendix A.

DETERMINE LOGISTICS

Before you begin to recruit participants, you have to make decisions about the logistics of the group.

When?

Focus groups are generally scheduled for 1-2 hours. No-shows are common for focus groups, so select a date and time that will make it easier for your participants to attend. If you're trying to reach working parents, hold the focus groups in the evenings or on weekends. If you are conducting a focus group of professionals—related to their work—you will probably want to hold it during business hours.

Where?

The focus group location serves two purposes: provides comfort and convenience for participants, and allows the facilitator to hear and record a group conversation. Conference rooms, meeting spaces in libraries or community centers, and similar venues (especially after hours, when quiet) are good options. Choose a focus group site that is easy to reach, with plenty of safe parking and access to public transportation. Ideally, it would be a location that is familiar to your participants.

How many?

If you are interested in the input from diverse groups of people, you will need to consider multiple focus groups to accommodate language and perspective differences and may need to stratify your group by characteristics (e.g., age, sex, race/ethnicity) and/or role (e.g., patient, provider, staff, manager). For example, if conducting focus groups within an organization, you may conduct separate focus groups with managers and with staff. If you are conducting focus groups with community members, you may need to hold focus groups in different languages (e.g., one in English and one in Spanish) to make sure you are able to hear from representatives from key segments of the community.

CASE EXAMPLE:

Best Shot Georgia Coalition is a coalition to promote childhood immunizations and address vaccine hesitancy among new parents. As part of the evaluation of their social marketing and parent advocacy campaign they planned to hold focus groups with parents as a way to understand parents' exposure to and thoughts about the campaign. They were also looking for feedback on how to improve the campaign to ensure it is engaging and effective. They decided to hold four focus groups—two each in rural and urban areas.

Best Shot Georgia Coalition scheduled the focus groups for two hours each. Coalition partners offered space to hold the focus groups at clinics and preschools in the selected communities to make it more convenient for participants. The focus groups were held in the evenings and weekends to allow working parents an opportunity to attend, with child care and food also provided.

Other incentives and support?

Depending on the population, offering incentives (e.g., food, gift cards, direct payment, etc.) can increase the likelihood that people will attend. Also think about whether other assistance or support may be required to promote participation, such as transportation assistance or on-site child care. Providing snacks or a meal (depending on the time of day) helps create a comfortable, informal atmosphere in which participants are more likely to relax — and talk.

IDENTIFY AND RECRUIT PARTICIPANTS

Focus group participants should have similar demographics or a similar relationship to the program so they regard each other as equals; you want to avoid power dynamics in the group. Groups ideally consist of 6 to 8 people, with no less than 4 or more than 12. If possible, recruit one or two extra people in the event there are cancellations or no-shows. You want to have a group large enough to get diverse opinions, but small enough to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to talk.

Once you have identified your target population for the focus group, send an invitation and/or distribute recruitment materials targeted to people you would like to participate. Begin recruiting participants at least two weeks prior to when you plan to hold your focus group. The invitation should explain the purpose of the focus group, how the information will be used, the value of participation, and provide an overview of logistical details and incentives, if offered. (see exapmle to the right).

CASE EXAMPLE:
Best Shot Georgia Coalition determined that the focus groups would be comprised of 8 parents of children under the age of 5.

They developed recruitment materials that included information about the purpose of the evaluation, eligibility requirements, dates and locations of the focus groups, and information about the incentive—a $20 grocery store gift card—as well as acknowledgement that child care and food would be provided. In the selected communities, they engaged pediatricians, teachers and parenting group facilitators in the recruitment efforts, by asking them to distribute materials. They also hung up signs in the offices and classrooms asking parents to call if they were interested in participating.

When potential participants called, they were asked questions to ensure eligibility before being officially enrolled in a particular session. Participants were then sent a confirmation letter with the details about the focus group, and they were called the day of the focus group to remind them and confirm that they would be attending.

Twelve parents were enrolled in each group to increase the likelihood that at least 8 would show up.

Not everyone who responds to your flyers or invitations for the focus group will be a member of your target audience. Use a screening guide for online or telephone sign-ups, listing the specific criteria for participation. The screening guide should also include questions about the best way for you to reach participants a day or two before the focus group so you can confirm participation. When enrolling people, make sure to inform participants how long the focus group will take and the importance of being on time.

Even after you meet the enrollment targets for your focus groups, continue to screen additional respondents so you can develop a waiting list of qualified participants in the event of cancellations.

SELECT AND TRAIN A FACILITATOR

Because you are dealing with group dynamics, focus groups can be difficult to facilitate. It is best to use a trained facilitator who has experience conducting focus groups, and who also understands what you are hoping to learn. Ideally, you want a facilitator who:

- Is neutral—ideally, someone unknown to the participants.
- Can relate to the participants—understands their background and experiences enough to be respectful and ask probing questions appropriately.
- Can create a comfortable environment for participants.
- Is skilled at facilitating group process—e.g., knows how to respectfully get back to the topic of discussion, how to engage everyone in the discussion without putting people on the spot, etc.
- Is familiar enough with the discussion topic to understand participants' comments and ask probing questions appropriately.
- Can recap the key discussion points at the end of the discussion to confirm what s/he has heard from participants.

The facilitator's job is to facilitate discussion by the participants—not to provide information or their own opinions. Focus groups are not appropriate opportunities to inform community members of your organization or program (although that can happen as follow-up or as you inform participants of the results of your evaluation).

It is important for the facilitator to be aware of the potential for "groupthink", in which a strong personality or group of people dominate the discussion and influence the opinions of others, who are inclined to go along with their opinions in the interest of group harmony. This can limit the diversity of viewpoints expressed in the focus group. A strong facilitator can minimize the risks of "groupthink" and provide a safe space for candid feedback from all participants. See Appendix B for tips about how to deal with difficult participants.

If you are able to use an experienced facilitator, make sure they understand the overall focus group purpose, the data collection protocol, and any next steps/follow-up. You also need to make sure they know how to record the information and what to do with completed responses or transcripts. Contact marketing and communications firms for potential referrals to experienced facilitators. The Georgia Evaluation Resource Center (ERC) can help you identify experienced evaluators with focus group experience: http://www.georgiaerc.org/.

If you would like someone on your staff to be trained as a focus group facilitator, the best way to learn is to shadow an experienced facilitator and debrief together after the session.

CASE EXAMPLE:
Best Shot Georgia Coalition reached out to members of the coalition to determine whether anyone had experience facilitating focus groups. The local health department had a staff person with experience running focus groups and was familiar with the campaign and with the population served. They determined that the same facilitator would travel to conduct all focus groups to ensure consistency.

DEVELOP THE FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

To conduct focus groups, you will need a written guide (a "protocol")—usually consisting of an introduction, an icebreaker, a set of questions for discussion, and a closing statement—based on your data collection objectives. It is often beneficial to involve the facilitator in developing the guide to ensure she or he understands the kind of information you are seeking.

A focus group protocol is intended to invoke discussion. Good questions in a focus group protocol:

- Sound conversational
- Are easy to say—the facilitator should be able to say them naturally, without difficulty
- Are short, clear and easy to understand
- Use words that resonate with participants—avoid using jargon, acronyms, and overly technical words, unless that is appropriate for the group
- Are open-ended—avoid asking leading questions or questions that can be answered "yes" or "no"
- Only ask one thing at a time, even if the concepts are linked. (For example, do not ask, "How has the program changed the way you eat and exercise?" Rather, ask about eating habits first and then ask about changes in physical activity.)

Also pay attention to the flow of the questions. Start your protocol with something that is easy to answer—introductions and maybe even an icebreaker—to get the conversation started and make participants feel at ease. The questions should then flow to keep the conversation going, avoiding abrupt changes in topics. Typically, questions will start more general and then get more specific as the focus group discussion progresses.

Include probes to be used if needed to guide the discussion and explore the topic in more depth. Sometimes, asking 'why' as a probe or follow-up question can put people on the defensive. One way to avoid this is to ask about specific reactions – for example, instead of asking, "Why did you like the campaign?", ask, "What features of the campaign did you like best?"

Be sure to end with a final or "wrap up" question. Consider a question like this: "If you had just one message or piece of advice for the people who designed this campaign, what would it be?"

When developing questions, focus only on information that you need to know. A guide for a one-and-a-half- to two-hour focus group generally includes no more than 12 questions—including introductions and wrap up—and gives the facilitator flexibility in moving the discussion forward. You want to leave enough time for sufficient discussion of each question. See Best Shot Georgia Coalition's focus group protocol on the next page.

Structured questions and answers can be a tremendous source of insights and information, but it's certainly not the only way to engage participants. Appendix C provides ideas about creative ways to engage participants during the focus group discussion.

TEST THE FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Testing your focus group protocol helps you ensure that you'll get the information you need. Ideally, you would organize a "pilot" focus group (with participants that share characteristics with those who will participate in the other focus groups), and ask for feedback about the focus group from participants afterwards. This gives you a chance to see if the questions make sense to your target population, if the flow of questions keeps the discussion moving, and if the number of questions is appropriate for the time available.

It may not always be feasible, however, to hold a pilot focus group with members of your target population; if this is the case, you may consider pulling together a "mock" focus group consisting of colleagues and/or friends to at least go through and provide their reactions to the protocol.

CASE EXAMPLE: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

OPENING STATEMENT: welcome participants, review purpose of the focus group, logistics, and set ground rules.

1. First we would like you to introduce yourselves. Would you tell us: 1) your first name, 2) how many kids you have & their ages, 3) what you do during the day (profession, volunteer activities, hobbies, etc.), and 4) why you decided to participate in this focus group.

2. Now we would like you to think back on your experiences making decisions about vaccinating your children when they were babies (that early series of shots)…. Can you describe that experience for us—how you made those decisions?

   PROBES
   a. How did you decide whether or not to get all the recommended vaccines?
   b. What were your thoughts and reactions to getting your children vaccinated?
   c. Who did you talk to?
   d. What questions did you have?

3. After that early series of shots what other times do you remember having to make decisions about vaccines?

   PROBES
   a. Did you find making decisions about vaccinating your children difficult?
   b. Were there any vaccines in particular that you had difficulty deciding about?

4. Now, we want to ask you about the Immunization Campaign in your community. What, if anything, do you know about this campaign?

   PROBES
   a. Have you seen posters?
   b. Attended any meetings where someone spoke about the campaign?
   c. Received any emails?
   d. Seen information about it online (such as on Facebook or Twitter)?

5. How would you describe your reactions to the campaign and/or its messages?

   PROBES
   a. What were your initial thoughts?
   b. Did you have any concerns?

6. How comfortable are you with the idea of a campaign focused on increasing parents' awareness of the importance of vaccines?

   PROBES
   a. What aspects of this campaign are you most comfortable with?
   b. What aspects, if any, make you uncomfortable?

7. What recommendations do you have for the team that designs and implements this campaign regarding ways to improve the campaign?

   PROBES
   a. Which messages do you think are most effective? Least effective?
   b. What kind of recommendations do you have about the materials?

8. What other thoughts do you have about promoting vaccination in your community that you would like to share with us?

CLOSING STATEMENT: recap discussion, thank participants, and summarize any next steps.

PLAN FOR RECORDING THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Each focus group is a one-time event, and you can't go back and recreate the conversation if you miss something important. Plan ahead for how you will capture data so that you have the appropriate staffing, equipment and materials available.

Creating a video or audio recording is usually helpful, but remember to get permission from participants beforehand. Be sure to test any recording equipment before the session begins and make sure there is no background noise so you will have a clear recording. If you don't have a note taker present, you will also need to plan for the recordings to be transcribed afterward.

If note taking is your method of choice, arrange for a skilled note taker to be present—when funds are available, some people hire a court reporter to document the conversation. Even with a note taker present, consider recording the conversation as a backup to the written notes and to retrieve verbatim responses as needed (e.g., for quotes).

Conducting the focus group(s)

BEFORE PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE

To get things off to a smooth start, ensure that you are ready for your guests when they arrive. Plan to be on-site at the focus group location at least 30 minutes beforehand to set up. This will include making sure the room is arranged in a way that will facilitate discussion, and setting out food and beverages, name tags or cards for participants, and a sign-in sheet so you'll know who attended. Get familiar with the facility and amenities (e.g., location of bathrooms, parking information, child care details, and who to contact if you need assistance). It's also a good idea to test your audio/video equipment and check in with the facilitator, note taker or anyone else there to support the focus group to ensure that everyone understands the expectations for the focus group.

CASE EXAMPLE:
Best Shot Georgia Coalition decided to hold a pilot focus group with members of the coalition who met the eligibility requirements of their target population. A few of the coalition partners brought new volunteers who were not yet familiar with the campaign, as they wanted to be sure the questions would be clear to people not used to working on vaccination issues. Based on the pilot test, Best Shot Georgia Coalition decided they did not need to make significant changes to the focus group protocol.

THE FOCUS GROUP ITSELF

Focus groups have three parts: the opening, the interview and the wrap-up.

THE OPENING: The facilitator first welcomes participants and does introductions. Then the facilitator will review the purpose of the focus group and the logistics, including a review of the group's ground rules for the discussion (see sample ground rules). An easy introductory question or icebreaker that gets the group talking is helpful in transitioning to the interview portion.

SAMPLE GROUND RULES

- There are no wrong answers, everyone's opinions and experiences count.
- Be respectful of other participants. Make sure others are done talking before you jump in, and avoid side conversations.
- If several people want to talk at once I'll try to keep track of those waiting. Feel free to raise your hand if you don't think I'm aware that you would like to talk.
- Don't be offended if the moderator cuts you off to move on—we have a lot to cover, and want to hear from everyone.
- To protect the confidentiality of all participants, what's said in this room stays in this room – especially specific details or experiences.
- Turn off cell phones or pagers.
- This is a voluntary activity. You may choose not to answer any questions, and you are free to leave at any time.

THE INTERVIEW: The facilitator's job is to guide participants through the questions in the protocol and to be sure that all participants have a chance to speak. The facilitator sets the tone of the focus group, affecting whether participants feel comfortable voicing their opinions. During the focus group, a good facilitator:

- Is not biased or judgmental of responses.
- Lets participants know that "they're the experts," reinforcing that the purpose of the focus group is to learn from participants.
- Is comfortable with some silence. Some participants may contribute more if they have time to consider the question before they speak.
- Avoids allowing one or two people to dominate the conversation. (See Appendix B for tips of how to deal with difficult participants.)

"We asked six questions and encouraged each participant to respond to each question. We asked them to share their experiences of utilizing our [services] and what the positives and negatives were. We did not supply the content, we elicited it from them. It was very telling…'rich data'."

– Grantee, Healthcare Georgia Foundation

The facilitator is also responsible for the pace of the focus group—keeping the discussion on point (i.e., avoiding irrelevant divergences) and ensuring that there is sufficient time to ask all questions and explore the ideas that come up during the discussion. Facilitators use probes—questions designed to stimulate ideas or encourage further sharing—to gather additional information from the group.

EXAMPLES OF PROBES

- "What do others think about…?"
- "I'd like to hear a little more about…"
- "Does anyone else have anything to add to what has already been said?"
- "Would you give me an example of what you mean when you say…?"
- "Has anyone had a different experience?"

The facilitator and note taker also need to pay attention to and record body language and non-verbal cues. This can be particularly helpful for the facilitator to engage participants who are not speaking up (for example, "Bill, I see that you are nodding. Have you had an experience similar to Maria's? Could you tell us about it?")

THE WRAP-UP: Before ending the focus group, provide an opportunity for participants to make any outstanding comments before the facilitator recaps the major discussion points. Don't forget to thank the participants for their time.

In addition, if you have both a facilitator and note taker present, they should debrief immediately after the session to compare initial impressions and key takeaways.

CASE EXAMPLE:

At the beginning of the focus group, Best Shot Georgia Coalition's facilitator welcomed participants and reminded participants of the purpose of the focus group and how the information would be used.

Once the logistics and ground rules were established, the facilitator asked if there were any questions, and then began going through the protocol. The first question was framed as an icebreaker to have everyone introduce themselves. A couple of the participants seemed a bit hesitant to speak up initially, but the facilitator skillfully drew them out. The facilitator led the group through the protocol, using the probes to elicit more extensive comments in a couple areas.

After the focus group was complete, the facilitator asked for any other comments, summarized the key take away messages that she heard, and thanked participants for their time.

After the focus group

After your focus groups are complete, you need to be aware of additional follow up with those who made the focus groups possible, begin to make sense of your data, and determine how you're going to report results.

THANK PARTICIPANTS AND CONTRIBUTORS

It is important to thank the people who participated in the focus group for their contribution and to inform them of any next steps. Tell them how the results will be used, and who to contact if they have any questions.

If other people helped to make the focus group possible (e.g., provided space, helped contact potential participants, etc.), you may also want to thank them for their help.

CASE EXAMPLE:
Best Shot Georgia Coalition sent thank you letters to all of the focus group participants, along with a copy of their educational brochure. They made follow up calls to the partners who assisted with recruitment and provided space for the focus groups to thank them and let them know how the focus groups went.

GET TO KNOW YOUR DATA

In evaluation, focus groups are often used to complement other sources of data. As a result, your analysis will likely have two components: analyzing the results of your focus group data, and integrating your focus group results with other data.

Focus group data may be different than the types of information you are used to analyzing. The basic steps in working with your data, however, are similar: organize, analyze, interpret, and understand the limitations.

Organize your focus group data

First, assign unique identification numbers to each unit of data that you are going to analyze (e.g., the transcript of each focus group). Check the notes or transcripts from each focus group for completeness first, and go back to your recordings if data are missing.

Record the responses from each question into a standard template. You can use standard word processing or spreadsheet products, such as Microsoft Excel or Word, organizing data by question and focus group (if you've done more than one). The key to recording data is making sure that you're consistent. If multiple people are entering data, make sure to have clear written instructions as to how to enter the data, and keep track of any decisions you make about data entry. Keep the original recordings and/or transcripts organized and numbered in case you need to refer back to the originals.

Analyze the data

Qualitative analysis entails organizing narrative data in a way so that you can look for themes—both similarities and differences among participants and across focus groups. Simple qualitative analysis can be done using basic word processing or spreadsheet tables or by hand. For more complex analysis, there are software programs to assist you (e.g., Atlas.ti, NVivo) but most require additional training.

Follow these basic steps to analyze qualitative data:

- Identify themes—or "codes"—that will focus your analysis. The codes can emerge as you begin reading through your data, or you can identify them in advance. The level of specificity in your codes will depend on the concepts of interest to you in your analysis. The table below includes a sample code description.
- Read through transcripts and highlight key quotes using highlight functions or brackets; mark the corresponding "code" by each quote. If more than one person is coding, it is beneficial to check the consistency between reviewers. To do this, select and independently code one focus group transcript, then compare codes to ensure that you are coding similarly. If there are significant discrepancies, you may need to better define your codes.
- Using the codes you marked, sort quotes into coded groups (themes). You can cut and paste similar responses (either using a computer or by hand); again, you can use a simple word processing table to assist with this, or use more sophisticated qualitative analysis program to pull reports.
- Identify patterns. As you look at the data for each theme, note the specific patterns you see and what new insights can be emphasized.
- Determine if there are themes for which additional analysis would be beneficial. For example, are there ways to sort your data that might provide additional insight? Are there themes you would like to break down further into sub-themes (e.g., the theme of "challenges" may be further broken down into sub-themes representing the types of challenges faced)?
- As you are conducting your analysis, it can be helpful to pull relevant quotes or stories from the data to help tell the story when reporting. Often this can be attached to the table describing codes, for example:

CODE	DESCRIPTION OF THEME/CODE	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTE
Experiences with vaccines	Comments related to personal experiences/stories related to vaccines (both negative and positive)	"Actually being able to see the disease and how it's actually affected people's lives and their quality of life definitely helped me make my decision on vaccines…" "decided to go ahead and do it, and [my daughter] had a bad reaction…so when it came time for her next round of shots, I opted out."

Interpret your findings

Once you have completed your analysis, you need to interpret the data to figure out what the results tell you. What do the data say about your organization or program that might need attention? What key findings would be of most interest to your stakeholders? What story does your data tell?

To help make sense of the information, first look at your focus group data all together:

> *"[From our focus group] we learned many things that were helpful to us, in particular, how and why the participants valued our [services]…what we thought would be an event that would be critical of us, was instead a learning experience that will help us figure out ways to positively tell our story."*
>
> **– Grantee, Healthcare Georgia Foundation**

- Review your data for patterns, trends or themes that help you to tell a clear and compelling story about your program/organization. While you will have already done this to some extent when identifying the codes, this is a good opportunity to take a step back and think about the larger patterns.
- Look for outliers (e.g., unique perspectives) as well as common themes, and note expected/unexpected results; consider what insights these provide.
- Highlight key points and lessons learned.

After you've identified the key findings from your focus groups, it is important to think about how these results are consistent—or inconsistent—with information you have collected through other methods. Focus groups can provide rich detail, but they are only one part of the story.

If your focus group findings are consistent with other data, they may provide examples or quotes to better illustrate such findings, or possible explanations for patterns you have observed. When findings from different methods reveal discrepancies, this can generate new questions for consideration. It may be that your focus groups captured a particularly unique group of individuals, and their perspectives, experiences and behaviors do not reflect those of most of your target population. Alternatively, there may be issues with some of your other data collection activities (e.g., survey questions were misunderstood), and the understanding you gain through focus groups can help identify opportunities for refining those.

Identify limitations of your data collection efforts.

Finally, identify any limitations in your approach, such as useful information that was not collected, segments of the population you were unable to reach or potential biases in the data. Think about how these limitations might affect your results, and what you may be able to do about them in the future. Identifying limitations strengthens your evaluation because it demonstrates that you acknowledge what your data can and cannot tell you.

For more information about data analysis and interpretation, see the Georgia Evaluation Resource Center's toolkit at www.georgiaerc.org.

COMMUNICATE THE RESULTS

To make effective use of your new focus group findings, you will want to consider how best to feed the information back into your program or organization to help with decision making and program improvement efforts. Such communication can take a variety of forms, such as formal reports to staff, slide presentations to your board, or a bulleted list of key findings for partners. Depending on the nature of your focus groups, you may also want to report back to participants and invite them to share their feedback.

For more information about developing a communication plan to share your evaluation results see the ERC toolkit at: www.georgiaerc.org.

As seen throughout this guide, while focus groups can be a powerful tool to gather rich information and perspectives about your program(s) or organization, there are a number of considerations and important steps to be taken to ensure a successful focus group experience. Careful planning, quality execution, and meaningful analysis are all essential if you are to obtain valuable data for use in planning or evaluation. The guidelines, samples and tips presented in this document provide the basic tools you need to incorporate focus groups into your own data collection efforts. If you have additional questions about whether focus groups would be helpful in your evaluation efforts or how you'd actually implement a focus group, contact the Georgia Evaluation Resource Center at: www.georgiaerc.org.

Resources:

- Krueger, R.A. (1997). The focus group kit. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Krueger, R.A. & Casey, M.A. (2000). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research (3rd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension (2008). Building capacity in evaluating outcomes: A teaching and facilitating resource for community-based programs and organizations. Madison, WI: UW-Extension, Program Development and Evaluation. Retrieved from: http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/bceo/pdf/bceoresource.pdf (Unit 5 is about data collection and section 5E is about focus groups specifically).
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation (1998, rev. 2004). Evaluation handbook. Battle Creek, MI: W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Retrieved from: http://www.wkkf.org/knowledge-center/resources/2010/W-K-Kellogg-Foundation-Evaluation-Handbook.aspx.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Focus Group Logistics Checklist

PLANNING AND ARRANGEMENTS:

- [ ] Location secured, and site information obtained (e.g., bus line, parking, contact/liaison for each site)
- [ ] Date(s) and time frame set
- [ ] Screening guide developed
- [ ] Invitations/announcements developed and distributed
- [ ] Focus group protocol developed and pilot tested
- [ ] Assistance for participants arranged (e.g., child care, transportation)
- [ ] Recording plan and equipment arranged

SUPPLIES/MATERIALS FOR DAY OF EVENT:

- [ ] Sign-in sheet and pen
- [ ] Name cards/tags
- [ ] Refreshments/food
- [ ] Flip charts/markers (optional)
- [ ] Incentives for participants (e.g., gift cards, goody bags)

ADDITIONAL ROOM SET-UP:

- [ ] Seating/configuration arranged
- [ ] Signage placed (if necessary)
- [ ] Recoding equipment in place and tested
- [ ] Separate table for refreshments

APPENDIX B: Facilitator Tips: Dealing with Difficult Participants

Any group, no matter how small or cohesive, is bound to yield at least one difficult situation for the facilitator. Here are some tips and reminders for dealing with some common situations:

RUDE PERSON

- Refer to group agreements: One at a time, no side conversations, hear from everyone
- Explicitly say you want to hear from others first. "Andre, let's hear from Ana since she has not had a chance to comment yet."
- Announce a break and talk to the person privately and ask him or her to control himself/herself
- Last resort: Announce a break and ask the person to leave

SHY, QUIET PERSON

- Make eye contact; if possible, seat this person across from the moderator to increase eye contact
- Encourage with smile

- Create gaps in the conversation for the shy, quiet participant
- Read body language cues ("I notice that you are nodding, Lee . . . ")
- Explicitly invite the person to participate ("Gloria, we haven't had a chance to hear from you . . . do you have another example?")

DOMINATING PERSON

- Avoid eye contact; if possible, seat this person next to the moderator to minimize eye contact
- Hold up your hand ("stop sign")
- Refer to ground rules about hearing from everyone, side conversations,
- Shift attention to other topics or speakers; explain why ("Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet.")
- Shuffle seats after a break (especially useful to break up side conversations)
- Flattery: call a break and ask the person to hold back on comments until others have spoken because his/her expertise is clearly intimidating others
- Last resort: eject the person from the group.

RAMBLING PERSON

- Discontinue eye contact; turn away
- Wait for an intake of breath (it will have to come sooner or later!) and interrupt with "Let's move on – we have a lot to cover today," or "That's really interesting, but we need to hear from others."
- Repeat the question and call on a different person.

APPENDIX C: Creative Ideas to Stimulate Discussion

A conversation and discussion framed by questions and answers can be a tremendous source of insights and information, but it's certainly not the only way to engage participants. If other activities fit with your time frame and research goals, consider mixing up the Q&A with some other activities, such as:

- Card Games: Writing down adjectives on cards to describe a particular event or situation; sharing or sorting them.
- Magic: Passing around a "magic wand" and encouraging people to explain the solutions to problems made possible by the magic wand.
- Report Cards: Grading or rating a service, a brochure, a new program on a scale (1-10, A-F, low/medium/high, etc.), and then discussing why they gave it that grade.
- Drawing a picture of an ideal version of something — such as a happy child or a safe and welcoming place — and explaining what makes the person or place happy, safe, welcoming, etc.

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