Introduction to Focus Groups

A focus group discussion is a structured discussion used to obtain in-depth information from a group of people about a specific topic. The purpose of a focus group is to collect information about people’s opinions, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, motivations and perceptions - not to come to consensus or make a decision.

Focus groups should be used when¹:
- Looking for a range of ideas, beliefs, or feelings that people have about something
- Uncover factors that influence opinions, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, motivations and perceptions
- Trying to understand differences in perspectives between groups of people
- Identify barriers and ways to overcome them
- Information is needed to shed light on quantitative data already collected
- High value placed on capturing the comments or language used by the target audience

Focus groups should not be used when¹:
- You want people to come to consensus
- You want to educate people
- You don’t intend to use the results but instead want to give the appearance of listening
- You are asking sensitive information that should not be shared in a group or could be harmful to someone if it is shared in a group
- You need statistical projections
- Environment is emotionally charged
- You can’t ensure confidentiality of sensitive information

Advantages of using Focus Groups:
- Flexible- the facilitator can probe for information and build off of the answers provided by other participants
- Captures detailed- rich, in-depth data
- Immediate results
- Encourages and stimulates individuals to share more openly
- Data can be combined with quantitative data to provide a complete picture about an issue

Disadvantages of using Focus Groups:
- May be challenging to recruit busy and/or hard-to-reach participants
- Need to schedule at least 3-6 focus groups to capture diversity
- Difficult to generalize results to the larger population
- Difficult to compare results across groups
- Facilitator must have specialized skills to successfully moderate a focus group
Planning and Conducting a Focus Group

Prior to selecting focus groups as a data collection method, the Community Profile Team should have reviewed the data, determined the questions to be answered and defined the target population(s). The demographic and statistical data narrowed the focus areas within the Affiliate's service area. The Health Systems Analysis informed the Community Profile Team which target populations are needed to be reached in order to answer the questions about the breast health and/or breast cancer problems.

Develop Data Collection Tools:
Focus groups involve guided discussions on specific topics. The conversations should be free flowing allowing the participants to openly provide their opinion. However, predetermined questions are used to guide the conversations and get at the needed information.

The discussion guide is the script that directs the facilitator. Include a script for the introduction, the purpose and the ground rules, and the closing statements. It is important that the discussion guide list the focus group questions in the order they are to be asked by the facilitator. A structured guide provides a platform to conduct each focus group in the same way to ensure quality data is collected. A sample discussion guide and participant demographic form is available in the Qualitative Data Toolkit on myKomen.

The following is the suggested sequence for focus group questions:

- **Introductory Questions**: The first couple of questions help participants think about the topic. For instance, these could be general questions about their health such as what they typically do to take care of themselves.

- **Transition Questions**: Transition questions get participants to move from the introduction topics to the ideas in the key questions. For example, a transition question would ask women where they go for breast cancer information or services.

- **Key Questions**: These questions can range from two to five and be direct, open-ended questions that ask exactly what it is that needs to be learned and understood.

- **Ending Questions**: The ending questions provide closure and reflection. These questions may also ask for suggestions or recommendations.

- **Summary Question**: The facilitator summarizes the major themes heard throughout the discussion in a short oral summary (two to three minutes). The facilitator then asks participants if the summary covered all the major points with additional comments and exceptions noted.
Qualitative Data Toolkit: Focus Group Process

In addition, it is best-practice to have the focus group participants read and sign a consent form, or give verbal consent that is documented in the notes. A sample consent form is available in the Qualitative Data Toolkit on myKomen.

**Select Sampling Technique:**
Because it is impossible to recruit and study every individual in a given target population the team must select a “sample” from that population. A sample is the subset or proportion of the population selected to study. A good sample accurately represents the population to include in the focus group discussion. Using sound sampling techniques assist in supporting that trends in the data are the same as the trends found in the population, if the entire population had in fact been interviewed. The sampling technique is the method used to select the sample of people to include in a focus group.

The technique selected largely depends on the following criteria:
- Target Population
- Accuracy
- Convenience
- Cost

Common sampling techniques for focus groups include snowball, convenience, and purposive:
- **Snowball Sampling:** Snowball sampling is helpful when there is no list of potential participants available or when the population is hard to reach. The technique’s main advantage is that it allows the Community Profile Team to get referrals for potential respondents that are not easy to get to.

  Snowball sampling includes the following steps:
  - Identify a person who meets the criteria
  - Ask them to refer others who also meet the criteria (friends or acquaintances)
  - As they identify names, the snowball gets bigger

  One disadvantage of using snowball sampling is that individuals are likely to refer others that are like themselves. This results in sampling bias as the first participants will have a strong impact on the sample. Snowball sampling relies on the vertical network of the participants. A weak vertical network may result in data that is not representative of the target population.

  For example, starting a snowball sample of women 40 years old and older that have not had a mammogram in the past year with a homeless woman, may lead to a sample with different barriers than non-homeless women. Therefore, any findings drawn about the sample, such as lack of insurance, will most likely be higher than what is true for women 40 years old and older in the general population.
However, if the goal is to reach as many homeless women that are 40 years old and older as possible in order to describe the behaviors and attitudes of homeless women toward breast health screening, then this is a fitting way to sample this hard-to-reach population.

- **Convenience Sampling**: Convenience sampling saves time, money and effort. A convenience sample is just that, convenient. These respondents are recruited because they are easy to reach/recruit because they are available at the time the data was being collected. However, one limitation is that the information gathered may not reflect the larger population (e.g. participants may be overselected/underselected/missed altogether)

  Individuals recruited from a breast cancer support group are an example of a convenience sample. Another example of convenience sampling is recruiting from places the target population frequents often such as churches, hair salons or malls.

- **Purposive Sampling**: This involves selecting a sample with specific characteristics. To use this sampling technique, start by identifying the different types of people who are important to include, such as those with stage IV breast cancer or triple negative breast cancer. Identify where to find these individuals. It may be possible to recruit all participants from a single clinic, or support group. However, the Team may have to recruit from multiple places depending on the focus group purpose. For example, if the Team wanted to find different individuals by health insurance type it may be necessary to recruit from a community clinic that accepts Medicaid, a public hospital where the uninsured go, and a private clinic that takes only private insurance.

**Determine Sample Size:**
The number of people to include in a focus group is between 6-12. It is best practice to conduct 3-4 focus groups with each type or category. Therefore, per type or category, the sample size should be between 24 – 48 people. For example, if your target populations are women 40 year old and older that have never received a mammogram and breast cancer survivors; then, 3-4 focus groups would be conducted with women that are 40 and older that have not received a mammogram and 3-4 focus groups would be conducted with breast cancer survivors. Ideally, focus groups are conducted until saturation is achieved. Saturation, or point-of-redundancy, is a term used to describe the point where the range of ideas has been heard and there are no new ideas being provided by the participants. If after four focus groups, new information is being provided, then the team should plan for 1-3 more focus groups.
Qualitative Data Toolkit: Focus Group Process

Using Incentives to Increase Participation:
The level of commitment to participate in a focus group is exceeds that of other data collection methods. Therefore, incentives may help with recruiting, and sends a message on the value of their time and perspective. Participants should be informed of the incentive prior to attending the focus group. The Community Health Team will need to plan for this in the budgeting process. The incentive should be appropriate for the population. Keep in mind that the chance to discuss their experiences and opinions may also be an incentive to some potential participants.

Purpose of incentives for focus groups¹:
- To get the participant to show up for the focus group- and to show up on time
- Encourage participant to hold the time of the focus group
- To communicate to the participants that the focus group is important

Collecting the Data:
- **Number of Focus Groups**: Best practice indicates to conduct between 3-4 focus groups with each type or category, or until the data collection is redundant (no new information) from the previous focus group.

- **Length of Focus Groups**: On average focus groups last 60-90 minutes. This provides enough time to go through several questions and get a good amount of information.

- **Location Guidelines**: Hold the focus group in a convenient and accessible location for participants. Look for a location that is quiet, private and in a neutral environment. Beware of potentially hostile or intimidating locations, or hosting organizations that may pose a conflict of interest. Do a little investigative work and confirm with people to select a location that is the most appropriate, convenient and inviting for the target population.

- **Guidelines for Setting the Time of the Focus Group**: The focus group participants determine when to conduct the focus group. For example, if trying to recruit working women for the focus group it is best to schedule the meeting right after work and provide food/beverages.

- **Recruit the Moderator and Note-Taker**: Interviewing looks deceptively simple, but it requires mental discipline, preparation and group interaction skills⁴. During the focus group the moderator is responsible for setting ground rules, keeping the discussion focused and on track, drawing out comments from quiet participants, asking for clarification or additional information from participants when needed, and keeping the tone of the conversation polite/even-keeled. Time should be invested in recruiting a skillful moderator as the data gathered from the focus group will be guiding the Affiliate’s strategic mission.
Qualitative Data Toolkit: Focus Group Process

The note-taker is responsible for taking detailed notes and writing down observations. If the focus group is recorded, the note-taker will not need to write down everything word for word. Instead, this person’s job is to listen carefully, observe group interactions, and summarize points and observations. [Please note: If recording a focus group session, the participants must provide written consent.]

The focus group moderator and note-taker may be a third-party (e.g. consultant) or possibly an Affiliate volunteer; however, it is essential that they are not a focus group participant. Ideally, the Community Profile Team should strive to have the same moderator and note-taker for each focus groups conducted to maintain consistent processes.

**Recommended Moderator Skills:**
- Comfortable and familiar with the focus group process.
- Has previous experience facilitating groups or meetings.
- Creates and maintains a comfortable environment for participants.
- Remains neutral: Does not provide personal feelings or opinions in stating the questions and on what is being discussed.
- Maintains control over the group and the topics being discussed, but is careful not to lead the discussion or appear aggressive or controlling.
- Is a good listener; understands what is being said and knows when to ask probing questions that get participants to expand on or clarify their comments.
- Is a good observer; notices when participants want to speak and gives them an opportunity to share their comments. Draws out quiet participants and creates a safe place where they can talk.
- Doesn’t put anyone on the spot, but watches for opportunities to bring quiet people in to the discussion.
- Maintains group enthusiasm and interest.
- Respects participants and their comments.
- Communicates clearly in writing and orally.
- Has a good sense of humor.

**Recommended Note-Taker Skills:**
- Ability to make name tags for participants and moderator, using first names only.
- Operate a voice recorder.
- Handling environmental conditions (air conditioning, room set up, lighting, etc.).
- Taking care of food and refreshments.
- Handling and distributing incentives at the end of the discussion.
- Handling unexpected interruptions (such as late comers or outside noise).
- Keeping track of the time (being time keepers).
- Assisting in summarizing key points made by participants.
Recruit Participants: Once the Community Profile Team knows what type of participants would provide the information needed, they need to recruit them to be part of the focus group. It is very important to have the right people in the focus group. Start recruiting at least a month in advance and call to remind participants one week before the focus group and again one day before the group is scheduled. It is a good idea to over-recruit by at least 20% because communication can be lost with some and others will not show. Remember to highlight any incentives that will be offered to motivate participants.

The follow strategies can be used to identify participants:

• Screening Tool: A screening tool can help get the right people by inquiring about a person’s background to make sure they have the characteristics needed. Screening takes a couple of minutes and involves asking a couple of questions that will confirm if the person is right for the focus group. The screening tool is a script that allows the screener to provide a brief background on the project and the information collected.

Include questions that qualify people into the focus group. Depending on what information is needed and who is wanted, there may be several qualifying questions. For example, qualifying questions may ask about the neighborhood where they live, their race/ethnicity, their health insurance status, and demographic questions (such as age, marital status, education, and income). Recruit those who meet all or most of the criteria. The screener can encourage the person to attend the focus group, highlight any incentives (if offered), and give the person specific information about the date, time and location of the focus group. The screening tool plays an important role in recruitment. A sample screening tool is available in the Qualitative Data Toolkit on myKomen.org.

• Lists: Think of potential partners that may already have a contact list of your target population. Because of the sensitivity of releasing names on lists, be thoughtful about how you make the request. Sharing a list of names is a major organizational policy decision and typically not made by front-line staff (e.g. secretarial or support staff).

• Nominations: Ask neutral third parties for names. These third parties are usually people who have the opportunity to get to know many other people. This would include local businesses, clergy, elected officials, or local residents.

• Piggyback Focus Groups: Add the focus group to an already occurring event, meeting, or occasion that is already attracting the target population.
On Location: Hold the focus group “on location”, or where the target population gathers for recreation, shopping, or other purposes.

Ads or Announcements in Newspapers and on Bulletin Boards: These ads should provide details of the focus group (date, time, location) and the criteria for participation. This technique is good to combine with the screening tool so interested individuals can call and further confirm that they are eligible to participate in the focus group. A sample focus group announcement is available in the Qualitative Data Toolkit on myKomen.org.

Conduct the Focus Groups:

Introduction: Begin the discussion with a welcome and introduction. Follow that with an overview of the project and an introduction of the note-taker. Then discuss your role during the focus groups, the ground rules and comments on confidentiality.

The introduction provides an honest overview of the information needed and the importance of that information to the work in breast cancer. The moderator should emphasize how the participants and their community will benefit from what is learned. Finally, it is very important to stress to participants that there are no right or wrong answers.

Confidentiality: Participants should be reassured constantly that their information is confidential. It will be necessary to repeat this during the screening process and at the focus group in order to make participants more comfortable and open to participate. Knowing that what they share is confidential may help participants share their perceptions and beliefs.

Consent: Prior to beginning the focus group, the participants should sign a consent form. The consent form should provide the purpose of the focus group, why they were selected, that their participation is voluntary, information collected from the focus group will be kept confidential, how information stored, and risks associated with participation. By signing the consent form, the participant agrees that they understand the information provided, their questions have been answered and that they agree to participate in the focus group.

Use the Discussion Guide: During the focus group the moderator should use the discussion guide created by the Community Profile Team as a road map and follow it closely. It is important, however, to be flexible if the order of the questions change or time runs out. Be prepared for this and have a plan for asking key questions before running out of time.
Moderating Techniques

- **Pause and Probe:** After asking a question, pause for five seconds. This five-second pause gives participants a chance to jump in and give their comments. Sometimes silence helps people build up the courage to speak.

- **Follow-up Probing Questions:** Use probing questions when the discussion is unclear or when issues don’t come up. For example, "Would you give me an example?" can be used when necessary to get more information from participants.

- **Responding to Comments:** Remember to stay neutral. Avoid using positive verbal responses such as "correct" or "that's good." Moderators may use encouraging remarks such as, “thank you for sharing that with us.”

- **Group Dynamics:** Watch for the dominant talker, quiet participant, or rambler, to see if they are affecting the discussion.

- **Dominating Participants:** If people are allowed to constantly interrupt, there is the risk that other participants may get angry and frustrated. To help prevent this, set up a ground rule about equal participation beforehand. At the first sign of trouble, refer to the ground rule about equal participation.

- **Draw Out Participants:** Don’t put anyone on the spot. Watch for opportunities to bring quiet people into the discussion. Learn participants’ first names and use them (provide nametags). It may be helpful to say after a few questions, “Let’s hear from those who haven’t had a chance to talk yet.”

- **Group Discussion:** Encourage interaction among the group. The moderator should try to deflect any questions posed to her/him and pose the question back to participants. If a participant looks at the moderator and says, “Isn’t that right?” the moderator should ask the group, “Has anyone else had a similar experience?” Moderators ought to speak less than any other person in the group.

- **Stay on Track:** It is easy for groups to move off topic during the discussion. Participants need the freedom to explore connections and ideas, but try to keep the discussion related to the session’s topic. Good moderators listen well and think quickly on their feet making sure the discussion stays focused.

- **Transitioning:** The moderator may summarize comments before moving to the next question so there is a clear transition from topic to topic, and participants are not confused about what is being discussed.

- **Handling Inappropriate Comments:** Sometimes participants share inappropriate comments, incorrect information, or harmful information during the focus group discussion. When this situation occurs, sometimes the participants correct each other and hold each other accountable. Irrespective, it is the moderator’s role to focus the discussion back to the question at hand and may have to reiterate the ground rules. In addition, if incorrect and/or harmful information is provided by a participant, the moderator should wait until the end of the focus group to address the situation as a matter of “fact” instead of addressing it during the discussion in which correction may make a participant feel their opinion is incorrect.
• **Document the Focus Group:** If the focus group is using a tape or digital recorder and a note-taker, then the tape or digital recorder will capture what was said, while the note-taker records observations. Combined they can present a clearer picture of what was said and how participants responded or reacted.

**Note-taking tips:**

- Make notes as complete and as clear as possible.
- Be alert for cues, posture, gestures, comments or facial expressions that can explain how the participants feel and react to the question.
- Listen for cues as to important points, transitions from one point to the next, repetition of points for emphasis and other issues.
- Do not try to take down everything that participants say. It is impossible and unnecessary because not everything is equally important. Spend more time listening and trying to capture the main points. The recorded discussion should help you fill in any missing gaps.

**Analyzing and Drawing Conclusions About the Data:**

Qualitative data analysis involves the coding, analysis and interpretation of themes/categories and descriptions in textual data and determines how they help answer the question(s) identified at the beginning of the process. This part of the qualitative data collection process is highly dependent upon the skills of the Community Profile Team’s qualitative resource. Please refer to Module 4 of the Community Profile Guidebook or Module 4 Toolkit: Data Analysis and Interpretation Section of the Qualitative Toolkit on myKomen.org for additional information on analysis and interpretation.

As data is collected, the Community Profile Team should discuss the following questions in order to make a decision on how the data is sorted and secured:

- **What does the focus group data look like once it is collected?** The information is comprised of narrative comments, which may fall into logical categories.

- **How will the data be collected and compiled?** After each focus group the moderator and note-taker should make notes and write down any additional comments. The note-taker should type up the focus group notes, using the tape recordings to fill in any gaps or make clarifications. Really long documents are not very helpful, as there is no easy way to see relationships across different focus group discussions. So the Community Profile team may want to consider organizing the data right from the start into major categories. These categories are most commonly the focus group questions.

- **Where will the focus group data be processed and compiled?** It is important to plan ahead where the data will be processed and stored during the data collection process. This eliminates any confusion that may occur when multiple team members collect focus group data. It also clarifies ahead of time what steps need to be undertaken to enter, compile, and analyze the different data pieces.
What about participant confidentiality? When collecting data from individuals the following are a few important rules to consider when handling their responses:

- Keep any identifying information and focus group notes in a locked place. This can be simply a locked filing cabinet drawer or password protected computer.
- Keep identifying information in one place so that less people have access.
- Remove any identifying information that is associated with data. When transcribing the tape-recorded focus group conversations, indicate each respondent in the word document by assigning a unique number. Start with “Respondent 1” and assign a different number to each participant entered.
- Avoid collecting unneeded information (e.g. social security numbers, phone numbers, etc.)

Sources: