Guidelines for Conducting Focus Groups for the County Self-Assessment

Definition and Description
A focus group is a form of qualitative research, examining why and how people behave in certain ways. It is a structured conversation with a facilitator and an ideal group size of 6 to 10 participants. Focus groups typically last from 1½ to 2 hours during which questions are asked in an interactive group setting. The number of focus groups will be determined by the county planning team, based on needs and priorities.

Participants are free to talk with other group members about a specific topic or topic area. A report is written that summarizes the comments from the group interaction. Individual participants are not identified in the report.

Purpose
Conducting focus groups with key stakeholders is an effective way to gauge readiness for implementing systemic change. Combining analyses of qualitative information from focus groups with quantitative data from county measures yields a more comprehensive and nuanced county self-assessment than could be achieved through quantitative data alone. An additional benefit of conducting focus groups is the inclusion of stakeholders at the inception of project planning, and early establishment of collaborative relationships that will be necessary for successful project implementation.

The county planning team is charged with deciding who will participate. It is essential to include Tribal partners at this initial stage of project development, and throughout all subsequent planning and implementation activities.

Focus Group Facilitator and Co-facilitator
The facilitator must be a neutral party with strong facilitation skills to guide the conversation and glean the needed information. It is important that the facilitator is viewed by the group as trustworthy and as someone who ensures confidentiality. The co-facilitator can take notes and provide additional assistance to the facilitator. Both facilitators meet before the focus group to review the questions and discuss plans for facilitation. After the focus group, they meet again to debrief and confer about the information that was obtained from group participants. Ideally, a Tribal partner should be invited to assist in planning the focus groups and to serve as facilitator or co-facilitator.
Focus Group Questions and Approach
Each focus group should have no more than 2 to 5 questions that should be selected ahead of time. The facilitator does not exercise power or authority, but instead establishes an environment in which participants feel safe to frankly voice their ideas and opinions. The focus group should resemble a conversation where all participants have the opportunity to share their thoughts and comments. Everyone should have an opportunity to be heard. If a Tribal partner is serving as the facilitator or co-facilitator, he or she may wish to open and close the focus group session with a customary blessing and expression of gratitude to the participants.

Focus Group Participants
Focus group participants may include:
- Staff
- Parents
- Youth
- Kin providers / Non-related extended family members
- Tribal partners and representatives
- Foster family agency staff
- Children’s attorneys / Judge / Commissioner / CASA
- Community agencies (e.g., First 5, Head Start, Healthy Start, public health, mental health, and faith-based organizations)
- Other service providers
- Any other participants who may have valuable information to assist the county

Selection of Focus Group Participants
Focus group participants should be selected based on their ability to represent a specific point of view. The group members may represent a diverse sample of the organization’s pool of personnel. It is difficult to conduct a focus group with fewer than 6 people and more than 10. Another difficulty is recruiting people to respond to the invitation and actually attend the group.
Key Considerations for Planning the Focus Group: (Also refer to the Focus Group Planning Guide.)

The following is a list of recommendations for planning focus groups:

- Consider forming a small planning committee with representatives from each of the invited groups to help in the planning process. Tribal representatives are essential to this effort. Other collaborators include agencies and providers who serve indigenous populations.

- Utilize the planning committee’s knowledge to decide the best location and time for the focus group. Conduct the focus group in a comfortable, safe, and logistically accessible location, and at a time that best meets the participants’ availability.

- Offer stipends for non-staff members to attend the focus group.

- Always have food and drinks available.

- Provide child care when conducting focus groups with biological parents and kin providers (preferably the child care is in the same room as the focus groups).

- Provide transportation and/or reimbursement for transportation.

- The terminology used in the focus group may or may not be familiar to the participants. It is the facilitator’s job to “translate” the information, answer questions, troubleshoot, and help guide the participants through the process.

Inviting the Participants

The following recommendations contribute to the success of focus group participation:

- Ask the planning committee members to call and invite the participants personally. Alternatively, an invitation letter could be sent first, and then followed up by the telephone call. For a sample letter, refer to the Letter Template for Engaging Stakeholders.

- Provide the “inviters” with a script to use for their telephone conversations.

- If stipends for group participants have been allocated, be sure to mention this in the invitation letter and telephone call.

- Send a reminder email to potential group participants.

- Call potential group participants two days before the focus group to check in and see if any challenges to attendance have arisen.
Focus Group Agenda (Also refer to *The Focus Group Planning Guide*.)

There are six parts to a focus group session concerning Native American / Alaska Native issues:

1. **Introductions and logistics (8 minutes)**

   “Hello, I am delighted that you are attending this focus group, as we are eager to hear your thoughts about this very important topic. Before we start, let’s do some quick introductions…..My name is X and I will be the facilitator of this group…Who’s next?”

   “The bathrooms are…. If you could please remember to put your cell phones on vibrate, please help yourself to food and drink….”

2. **Opening blessing (2 minutes)**

   The Tribal facilitator or co-facilitator may choose to open the session with a customary blessing for the participants and the work they are about to begin.

3. **Statement of the issue/concern/problem and why people are gathered (10 minutes)**

   “The objective(s) of this focus group is …”

4. **Questions that guide the conversations (60–90 minutes depending on timeframe chosen by the county)**

   *Questions/Conversation*

5. **Conclusions and restatement about how the focus group notes will be used (8 minutes)**

   “Thank you very much for sharing your experiences and thoughts about this very important topic. As you can see, we have written down notes and will be transcribing them and writing a report that will capture the information from this group to help our county gauge readiness for implementing systemic change….”

6. **Closing (2 minutes)**

   The Tribal facilitator or co-facilitator may choose to provide a closing blessing that gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the participants.