

# FOCUS GROUPS

## DESCRIPTION

Focus groups are facilitated discussions about the site and the community by small groups of stakeholders. A focus group usually consists of three separate group sessions of seven to 12 individuals. Each group is somewhat homogenous (*e.g.*, one group may contain residents living near the site with children at home). Although appearing informal, focus group discussions are structured around a series of questions carefully designed to help people talk freely. Focus groups are useful to understand stakeholders' opinions on site activities, why stakeholders feel as they do, and stakeholders' needs and expectations. By holding separate focus group sessions with different groups, you can find out exactly how each group feels, and why. This helps you address group concerns and find common ground to unify the community.

## REQUIRED ACTIVITY?

No.

## MAKING IT WORK

### WHEN TO USE

Focus groups are useful throughout the Superfund process to learn about citizen knowledge and expectations. Focus groups also help you learn *why* residents feel as they do. By understanding where opinions and beliefs come from, you can more effectively address concerns and avoid problems. Focus groups foster communication better than large public meetings where individual discussion is not practical. Focus groups may provide feedback to improve outreach tools. If you sense that a particular group of stakeholders is unhappy with a site activity, a focus group is an excellent way to begin a meaningful dialogue without exposing the entire community to issues that are pertinent to only a small group.

### HOW TO USE

As with any communications tool, refer to your *Communication Strategy* first. Then, identify focus group participants and invite them individually to participate. Invite participants who will contribute to the process, who may have something thoughtful or thought provoking to say, who won't be intimidated, and who won't argue for argument's sake. Have a list of 15-20 people to allow for those who fail to attend. See the list at the end of the tab for ideas on appropriate homogenous groupings for small group sessions.

You do not have to rent a fancy facility with two-way mirrors. However, the facility should comfortably accommodate up to 13 people (the facilitator plus 12 participants) around one table. There should also be room for an additional desk and chair for the assistant moderator, and several additional chairs to accommodate observers, such as yourself. The chairs should be comfortable. The facility must meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). For requirements, visit the Center for Independence (CFI) *Internet* site: [www.centerforindependence.org/](http://www.centerforindependence.org/). The site includes weekly updates and information about making your public space accessible. For a free copy of the ADA Guide for Small Businesses, published by the U.S. Department of Justice, call CFI at (970) 241-0315.

Finding a time and location that satisfies everyone is impossible, so select a place that is centrally located and convenient and a date and time that is convenient for you, your moderator, and the majority of participants. Focus group meetings usually last about two hours. EPA will not pay for food or beverages, either directly or indirectly through its contractors. However, refreshments can be purchased by a sponsor.



[See  
Communi-  
cation  
Strategies,  
Tab 3](#)



[See  
Internet,  
Tab 10](#)

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Meet with your moderator to thoroughly choreograph the session. Know what kinds of information you want and help the moderator develop questions to elicit that information. If you and the RPM plan to attend the sessions, be detached observers, not participants; otherwise, your involvement could affect participants' reactions. Have the moderator tape record the entire session, and announce the recording in the scripted introduction. After the focus group is over, meet with the moderator and assistant moderator to review the results. Think about how to use the information you get, either by improving a specific outreach tool or designing a CI activity to address concerns raised during the focus group. Respond to any information requests from participants. Brief the site team on the results.

## Tips

- Use a trained, objective, third-party facilitator.
- Make sure your facilitator understands the objectives.
- Work with the facilitator to script the introduction and questions.
- Inform everyone that the purpose is not to reach consensus, but to gather information.
- Ask participants to complete a brief evaluation form before they leave.
- If you or the RPM attend, restrict your role to *non-reactive* observation.

## RELATED TOOLS/RESOURCES IN THE TOOLKIT

- [Informal Activities, Tab 20](#)

## ATTACHED ITEMS WITHIN THIS TOOL

- Attachment 1: Focus Group Check List
- Attachment 2: List of Possible Groupings
- Attachment 3: Sample Introduction
- Attachment 4: Sample Questions

# ATTACHMENT 1: FOCUS GROUP CHECK LIST

Site: \_\_\_\_\_

## FOCUS GROUP PREPARATION

- \_\_\_ Meeting date & time: \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Meeting location: \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ Rental rate: \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Seating capacity: \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Directions distributed: \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ Staff or contractors name: \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Translator needed:
  - Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ Contacted/confirmed: \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ Rate: \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Site team members notified:
  - \_\_\_ RPM: \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ Tox: \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ Hydro: \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ Local officials: \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ Others: \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Prepare meeting evaluation forms

## INVITATIONS

- \_\_\_ Invite all participants (phone, mail, or both) at least 2 weeks in advance
- \_\_\_ Record responses
- \_\_\_ Verify participants attendance 2 days before meeting
- \_\_\_ Send materials to information repositories

## EQUIPMENT

- \_\_\_ Cassette recorder/tapes/batteries
- \_\_\_ Microphones (stationary & remote)
- \_\_\_ Video camera/tape
- \_\_\_ 3-Prong electric adaptor (several)

## ROOM ARRANGEMENTS

- \_\_\_ Room layout \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Room setup
  - \_\_\_ Who does it? You \_\_\_ Them \_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Coffee/tea/soda/snacks setup
  - \_\_\_ Who donates it? \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Point of contact for facility arrangements
  - \_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ # of people expected: \_\_\_\_\_

- \_\_\_ Someone to record session:
  - \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Time available \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Set up time: \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Must vacate by time: \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Security (meet prior to & day of)
- \_\_\_ Janitorial services
  - \_\_\_ Restrooms open
  - \_\_\_ Ventilation
  - \_\_\_ First aid supplies
  - \_\_\_ Return room to original condition
    - \_\_\_ Who does it? You \_\_\_ Them \_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Telephone access in case of emergency

## BASIC SUPPLIES

- \_\_\_ Name plates/name Tags
- \_\_\_ Directional signs
- \_\_\_ Evaluation form
- \_\_\_ Copies of most recent fact sheets
- \_\_\_ 3" x 5" index cards
- \_\_\_ Pens/pencils
- \_\_\_ Markers
- \_\_\_ Easel/flip chart
- \_\_\_ Poster paper
- \_\_\_ Pad of blank paper
- \_\_\_ Masking tape
- \_\_\_ Scissors
- \_\_\_ Business cards
- \_\_\_ Plastic drinking cups ~ pitcher
- \_\_\_ 1 yard of strong cord

## MEETING FOLLOW-UP

- \_\_\_ Return equipment
- \_\_\_ Debriefing among meeting participants
- \_\_\_ Respond to requests for information
- \_\_\_ Prepare/distribute meeting summary
- \_\_\_ Prepare meeting evaluation
- \_\_\_ Prepare and distribute recommendations for future sessions
- \_\_\_ Add meeting attendees to mailing list
- \_\_\_ Send names & phone #s to GPRA contractor

## **ATTACHMENT 2: LIST of POSSIBLE GROUPINGS**

- Local officials
- Residents living adjacent to the site
- Residents living within known paths of migration
- Residents within “X” miles of the site
- Residents as above with children at home
- Residents as above with elderly at home
- Local health care providers
- Leaders of local civic/service clubs
- Members of local environmental groups
- Members of citizens’ groups organized in response to the site
- Local business people
- Members of the local Chamber of Commerce
- Local clergy
- Local media

Although focus groups usually comprise three separate smaller group sessions, you are not limited to just three.

## ATTACHMENT 3: SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

Hi, welcome to our session tonight. On behalf of EPA, I want to thank you for taking time out of your busy day to take part in our discussion about the **name of site** here in your community. My name is \*\*\*; my assistant tonight is \*\*\*. We work for a company called \*\*\*, which has been hired by EPA to do some research into communities affected by hazardous waste sites, like yours, and advise EPA about how to work with your community in reaching decisions that will lead to a good cleanup.

EPA believes that a successful cleanup can only happen if informed citizens are involved in the process. They have a program called community involvement that is dedicated to working with local residents throughout the cleanup process, and they will use the information we provide, through sessions like this, as well as through written questionnaires and telephone interviews, to make that process meaningful and effective.

You are one of two groups we'll be meeting with this week. These sessions are called focus groups because the discussion and the participants are highly focused. Our discussion will focus on EPA's communications with you about the site, and their community outreach efforts, *not* on technical or site-specific issues. You were invited because you participated in our community interviews and have expressed a serious interest in this site.

The other group is made up of local officials and other community leaders. EPA wants to know what's important to you, what you need from EPA, and what you expect from them (in terms of involvement and communications). EPA needs to know this so that they can prepare a community involvement plan that meets those needs and expectations.

We have several questions that we hope will stimulate discussion among you. However, we are *not* trying to change anyone's mind or convince anyone of anything. We are not trying to solve any problems, make any decisions, or forge any consensus. We want to hear your ideas and understand your feelings about EPA's outreach work in your community. We want to know if what EPA is doing is working for you. There are no right or wrong answers. There are differing points of view, and each one is just as important and valid as the next. That said, let me emphasize that the only stupid idea is the one that *isn't* shared.

Before we begin, let me suggest a couple of things that should make the discussion more productive. First, I need to point out the microphone that's on the table, and tell you that we are audio taping this; we must provide a report to EPA after we return home, and a clear tape recording is the only way that we can be sure to accurately capture the points that you make. ***Let me assure you that no names will appear in the report that summarizes this meeting;*** so, if you feel more comfortable not using names as you address each other, that is fine. The microphone is pretty sensitive, but it would be helpful if you would speak up, even if you're responding to the person right next to you. You don't need to raise your hand to talk, but it would be more helpful and considerate if only one person speaks at a time. And please keep in mind that we're interested in negative comments as well as positive ones; we want to hear what you *really* think.

My job tonight is to be your guide through this session. I'll ask questions, and listen; I'll keep things moving and on track; but I won't participate in the conversation, so please feel free to talk with one another. I want to emphasize that neither \*\*\* nor I work for EPA; we cannot answer your questions about the site, the cleanup, where they are in the process, or anything of a technical nature.

Let's begin by finding out a little more about each other. We'll start over here to my left and go around the table. Tell us your name, what prompted your interest in the site, and how you first learned about the site.

## ATTACHMENT 4: SAMPLE QUESTIONS

### FOR ALL SITES

1. How would you describe EPA's efforts to communicate with your community?  
Do they seem to be really interested in providing you with information?  
Do they seem to be really interested in hearing what you have to say?  
Do they seem to be trying to provide opportunities for you to become actively involved?  
Do they seem to want you to be involved?  
Is the information you've received from EPA easy to understand and needed?
2. What stands out in your mind as the most successful thing EPA has done in working with your community so far? What made it so successful?
3. What was their biggest failure? What made it such a failure?  
Hand out the report card.
4. PLEASE — JUST SET THIS IN FRONT OF YOU; DO NOT OPEN IT OR TURN IT OVER UNTIL I TELL YOU TO. You're going to use this to give EPA a report card on how they're doing in your community; but this is a little different from most report cards. On most of them, somebody in authority tells you what's important, and then tells you how you're doing relative to some scale they developed. On this one, *you* get to tell EPA what's important to *you*, and then you get to tell them how they're doing. But we found that this works best if we give you a reference point to start from, so we'll start with things that EPA thinks they should do in their outreach and communications if they are to be successful. Here's a list of things that EPA uses to judge its success in community involvement. In the next column, grade EPA on how well you think they're doing. A = exceptional; B = exceeds your expectations; C = meeting your expectations; D = less than you expect, F = failing.
5. In the third column, I want you to tell me whether you agree that each item is a measure of success in your eyes. If you agree that it is, put an Y; if you don't agree, put a N.
6. Now, open the sheet to the full page; you'll see a blank chart. In the column to the far left, write down any other things that you think you would expect from EPA and that would figure into your judgement of their communications as successful or not.
7. Grade them on how they're doing. If they aren't doing it at all, then they're failing.
8. Now, in the last column, rank all of the factors on both tables in terms of importance. What's MOST important to you, next, and so on.
9. Let's talk for a few minutes about this.  
What do you think about EPA's list of measures of success?  
What did you add to the list?  
How did you rank them?

### FOR NEW SITES

10. Take a minute to think about what concerns you most about this site; write down the three issues or concerns about this site that weigh the heaviest on your mind.  
*Pause a few minutes to let them think and write.*

OK, let's go around the table and share what you've written. Let's start on the right this time.

*Have the assistant record responses on the flip chart.*

11. All things considered, of these things, which is *the* most important to you? Write it down.

*Pause a minute or two.*

Let's go around the table and see what you think. Let's start over there in the middle.

*Assistant puts check marks in front of each of the issues selected to tally score.*

12. Assuming that this group is a fair representation of the community, these are the top three concerns in the community. What would you expect EPA to do to help you and your neighbors deal with them?

OK, we're just about finished. Our discussion tonight was about EPA's attempts to keep your community informed about and involved in what is happening at this site. I think we had some good discussion and, before we close it up, I'd like to make sure that we captured the essence of it accurately. \*\*\*, would you please give us a quick summary of what you heard tonight?

Thanks, \*\*\*. *(To the group)* Have we missed anything? *(Pause)* Is there anything that stands out in your mind?

Thank you very much for your help. We'll provide a report of this session to the Community Involvement Coordinator (or CIC), to EPA Headquarters, to the EPA Regional Office, and to each of you. Thank you.

