INFORMATION GATHERING TOOLKIT

Basic Tools for Quantitative and Qualitative Data Collection

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Acknowledgements:
This toolkit utilizes resources and information from the following sources:

Colorado Regional Prevention Services
www.rpscolorado.org

OMNI Institute
www.omni.org

The Belmont Report
http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html

Urban Institute
http://www.urban.org/nonprofits/index.cfm

USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation
"Conducting Focus Group Interviews." *Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Tips*. 1996 (10).

<u>ETHICS, CONFIDENTIALITY AND CONSENT</u>

<u>Principles of Research Ethics</u>

1. Voluntary participation
2. Confidentiality
3. Professional Competence
4. Respect for People's Rights, Dignity, and Diversity
5. Justice

Voluntary Participation

- Individuals must agree to participate in the survey, focus group, or interview of their own free will. Written consent is preferred, but recorded verbal consent is acceptable as well (both parents and youth most often must consent for youth participation). Adults may agree to participate without having to sign a consent form or record their agreement to participate.
- It is essential that individuals understand that their participation is voluntary and that there are no consequences for refusing to take part in the study or to answer specific questions.
- The nature of the study must be explained, openly and honestly. It is helpful to make sure that there is adequate time to answer any questions that an individual may have <u>before</u> and <u>during</u> the survey, focus group, or interview.
- It is always a good idea to ask participants if they have any questions before proceeding. If an individual does not want to continue his or her participation in the survey, focus group, or interview, his or her desire to withdraw should be respected immediately.

Confidentiality

- Personal information that is revealed during a survey, focus group, or key informant interview should be kept confidential, meaning that you cannot share the information gained through these efforts with anyone except another person involved in the information gathering effort. This also means that you cannot share any information that would allow another person to know who participated in the study. Exceptions to this rule can be made when it is clearly outlined in the consent process and participants understand how their information may be used. If this is the case, information gatherers should ask for consultation from research professionals to ensure that confidentiality standards are met.
- When basic conditions of confidentiality cannot be met, the individual must be made aware of the limitations. Participants should know that while the information they reveal in the survey, focus group, or interview will be kept confidential, their participation may not be confidential if, for example, their names were brainstormed in a public meeting.

Professional Competence

- You must not misrepresent or misuse your position as an information gatherer. You should undertake only those tasks for which you have been trained. For example, if a client begins to open up to you during an interview, you must not act as a counselor if you have not been trained as such.

- Information gatherers should ask for consultation from research professionals when needed, in order to ensure quality interactions with individuals and the collection of quality information.

Respect for People's Rights, Dignity, and Diversity

- Any information gathering effort must respect the rights, dignity and worth of all people.
- Information gatherers are respectful of the rights of others to hold values, attitudes, and opinions that differ from their own.

Justice

- Information gatherers must strive to maximize the possible benefits of assessment efforts while minimizing possible harms.
- Information gatherers have an obligation to ensure that participants are not unduly burdened by their participation in assessment efforts. Participants should be selected on the basis of their relevant knowledge and experience; they should not be selected simply due to their availability, compromised position, or manipulability.

For further information about Research Ethics, please review
The Belmont Report available online at:
http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html

<u>Tips for Writing Informed Consent Documents</u>

The ethical principle of respect for persons requires that subjects be given the opportunity to choose what shall and shall not happen to them. Valid informed consent requires:

1. **disclosure** of relevant information to prospective subjects about the research;
2. their **comprehension** of the information, and
3. their **voluntary agreement**, free of coercion, to participate.

Upon being provided with all relevant information about a survey, adults may choose to complete the survey without signing a consent form. However, if your information gathering efforts require the participation of youth under the age of 18, you *<u>should</u>* obtain written or verbal parental consent. Below are some suggestions on how to develop consent forms.

Disclosure

- It is important that a participant in a study understand the type of information gathering effort being conducted and the purpose of the effort before they agree to participate. The participant should be made aware of the expected length of their participation as well as any risks and benefits associated with their participation. Participants should also receive the information gatherers' contact information should they wish to ask questions or withdraw from the effort.
- Before signing a consent form, participants should also be made aware of the confidentiality (or lack thereof) of the process. Participants of research projects share valuable and sometimes sensitive information with the researcher, and they trust that the researcher will ensure that their identity is protected. Researchers, or persons conducting the data collection, must agree to keep personal information that is revealed to them confidential. Specific data or information that identifies individuals as participants in the study cannot be shared. To ensure confidentiality, codes can be used instead of participant names on all documentation, including written notes during or after a focus group or interviews.

Comprehension

Use headings to make informed consent documents clear and easily understandable. The following are suggested headings to include in a consent form:

- Introduction
- The purpose of this information gathering effort
- Procedures for this information gathering effort
- Potential risks and discomforts associated with the information gathering effort
- The benefits of participating in the information gathering effort, if any
- Other choices available besides taking part in the information gathering effort
- What will happen to the information that is collected
- Compensation, if any
- How to withdraw from the information gathering effort
- Explanation of confidentiality

Voluntary Agreement
Participants should understand that their participation is voluntary and that there are no consequences (e.g., the services they receive at the program will not be impacted) for refusing to answer specific questions. It should also be explained that participants may withdraw at any time. Once a person has been made aware of the purpose of the information gathering effort as well as the associated risks and benefits, they must indicate their agreement to participate, or their agreement to allow their child to participate, in one of two ways:

1. By signing the consent form
2. By indicating verbally on a recording that they (or their child) wish to participate in the study.

SURVEYS

Surveys: An Overview

What is a survey?
A survey is a structured set of questions or statements given to a group of people in order to measure their attitudes, beliefs, values, experiences, or tendencies to act. Surveys are often used as a means of data collection as they provide a way to collect a large amount of quantifiable information in a systematic way.

Why are surveys useful?
- **Surveys can be designed to fit any audience.** Survey content should be designed with the intent of collecting data from a particular group of people who will have valuable insight into the topic of interest. For example, as clients use your organization's services, they are prime candidates to provide feedback on their experiences with, and perceptions of, your organization.
- **Surveys seek information about outcomes.** Client impacts are important program outcomes that are often best tapped through surveys.
- **Surveys can be used to obtain information about many types of services.** Just as surveys can be designed for a target audience, they can be designed for specific program areas.
- **Surveys are systematic.** Survey results can be generalized as the information is collected in an organized fashion.
- **Surveys can be conducted regularly.** Many programs are interested in knowing how they are doing. Surveys can provide snapshots of an organization's performance in the area(s) of interest as well as be designed to measure change over time. This information can be used to inform programming and improve services.

What are some limitations of surveys?
- **Survey development can be time-consuming and costly.** Developing good questions that will elicit the desired information without leading respondents can be difficult.
- **Surveys are time sensitive.** They should not require respondents to recall information from experiences that happened over a year ago as such information may not be reliable as the respondent's recollections may not accurately reflect the feelings they had at the moment.
- **Surveys may not capture complex answers or explanations.** Scales used by respondents to answer questions may not capture nuances.
- **Data collection efforts may be a burden on staff members.** Survey administration and collection may be costly and require the development of new skills by staff members.

Surveys: Developing Primary Areas of Interest

The survey process begins long before the surveys go out! Before your organization starts developing a survey, it may be useful to consider the following:

- Establish clear goals of your survey effort. When you know what your purpose is, it is easier to identify what you want to learn from your information gathering efforts.

- Identify what kind of information you would like to gather. Organizations often have a difficult time distinguishing between *interesting* and *important* kinds of information, which often results in long surveys that may burden the respondent.

- Determine who to survey and how many surveys will need to be collected to obtain valid information. Language level and accessibility are just two issues that may limit who can complete a survey. If you cannot survey all the members of the target group, sampling techniques can be used. Please see the next page for more information on different sampling strategies.

- Decide whether you would like to create a paper survey, an online survey, or both. Each format has advantages and disadvantages. Consider what would be most convenient for survey respondents.

- Decide who should design and conduct the survey. Organizations can choose whether to work on surveys entirely in-house, primarily in-house but with assistance from outside people, or entirely contracted out. Alternatively, organizations may decide to use surveys that have already been developed.

Surveys: Sampling Strategies

If you are unable to collect information from all members of a population of interest (clients, homes in the neighborhood, etc.), you can use targeted sampling strategies to collect information from a small sample of this population. However, depending on the sampling strategy utilized, the information gathered from a sample of a population may not always be generalizeable to the larger population. To determine how many people should be in your sample to obtain a truly representative sample, a sample size calculator can be found at www.surveysystem.com.

- **Convenience Sampling:** In convenience sampling, people are chosen to be part of the sample simply because they are readily available. This may mean that the first 150 people through the door are asked to participate in a survey, or that people are asked to voluntarily complete a survey. While this is the most commonly used sampling strategy, use of this technique is not recommended because the information gathered cannot be generalized to all members of the population. For example, the first 150 people through the door may be more motivated than the population as a whole, and survey respondents who voluntarily complete a survey may have more of a commitment to the organization administering the survey than those who do not complete it. Additionally, when convenience sampling is used, you are more likely to get people who feel a particular way about the survey topic area.

- **Systematic Sampling -** Another sampling strategy is systematic sampling. In systematic sampling, every n^{th} member of a population becomes part of the sample. For example, you can choose a random start place in your current list of clients, and then select every 7^{th} client to be a part of the sample until you have the desired sample size. Although this technique is preferred over convenience sampling, it is still not a truly random sample and may produce findings that cannot be generalized to the entire population.

- **Random Sampling -** In order to gather information that is representative of the larger population, you must obtain a random sample of people to complete the survey. If you have a relatively small population, you can put all the names of the members of the population into a hat and draw names until you obtain your sample size. If your population is too large for this technique, the simplest way of obtaining a random sample is to assign all members of your population (clients, homes in the neighborhood, etc.) a number, and then use a random number table to select who will be invited to participate. The following websites may be helpful in ensuring the selection of a random sample:

Surveys: Tips for Survey Development

- Begin with an introductory statement. At the top of the survey, briefly describe the purpose, identify the person or group conducting the survey, request participant assistance, provide general instructions and include information about confidentiality and consent as appropriate. You should end with a note of thanks or appreciation.

- Include clear instructions. Additional instructions and reminders can be necessary for each section within the survey (e.g., make one selection; check all that apply, etc.). Some rating scales may also require that the respondent be asked to just check the first response that comes to mind whereas in other cases, a well-considered response is needed.

- Ask simple questions that will elicit clear information. If your organization has decided the survey will be designed and conducted in-house, it may be useful to ask the following questions when developing survey questions:

  - What kind of information do you want to obtain? Will the answer to your question be useful in gathering such information?
  - Is the question necessary, or just interesting? Consider eliminating interesting questions in the interest of keeping the survey as short as possible.
  - Is the question easy to understand? Will your clients be able to read and answer the question without any difficulty?
  - Will the client be willing to answer the question as it is asked?
  - Does the question ask only one thing? Avoid asking questions which ask more than one thing in the same question. For example, "How would you rate your interaction with the desk staff and doctor?" Perhaps the desk staff were respectful but the doctor was not, or vice versa.
  - Is the question as short as possible?
  - Does the question lead the respondent to answer in a certain way? For example, "How positive was your experience at our organization today?" instead of "Please rate your experience today."
  - Do all questions have adequate and appropriate response options?

- Begin with factual, non-controversial questions before asking more sensitive questions.

- Ask questions in a logical, flowing order. Ask general questions on a topic before asking specific questions on that topic.

- Define all difficult terms and/or abbreviations. For example, if your organization is informally referred to as DCRP, explain what that abbreviation means before using it.

- Conduct a brief pilot study (e.g., administer the survey to at least a few individuals who are similar to your sample) on your questions to identify difficult items and administration problems, as well as the time required to complete the survey.

Surveys: Types of Survey Items

- **Close-ended Items:** questions that require a participant to select from a set of response options.

  - **Likert-scale**: Questions that ask respondents to indicate their response using a scale that ranges from one extreme to another, i.e. 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.
  - Recommendation: Ensure that response options are balanced, that is, there aren't more options for a respondent to answer in a positive manner than in a negative manner. Allow for a "Don't Know" and/or "Not Applicable" response.

  - **Multiple Choice**: Questions that allow the respondents to select an answer from several pre-defined options.
  - Recommendation: Provide instructions about whether the participant should check all that apply or make only one selection. Allow for a "Don't Know" and/or "Not Applicable" response.

The Urban Institute says: "*Because closed-ended questions have fixed, pre-established answer categories for selection by respondents, the quality of the information elicited depends on how well questions and response categories are crafted. Good questions are generally simple, clear, short, and unbiased.*"

- **Open-ended Items**: questions that allow for the respondent to answer in any way they choose.
  - Recommendation: While open-ended questions can provide a depth of information that close-ended questions cannot, use them carefully as they are more difficult to analyze.

The Urban Institute says: *"Although most questions will likely be closed-ended, it can be quite useful to include a few open-ended questions, such as "Why do you feel that way?" or "Please explain." It is especially useful to ask for explanations of negative ratings to provide guidance for corrective actions. It is also good practice to end a client survey with a question like, "In what additional ways could we have helped you?" or, "Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the service you received?" or, "What can we do to improve our performance? Open-ended questions give clients an opportunity to explain some of their closed-ended answers, and permit them to give feedback in a manner that reflects their own perspectives. In essence, open-ended questions allow clients to express themselves in their own words and feel they have been heard. Equally important, the organization can use such questions to ensure that important information is not missed, help interpret the patterns and findings from responses to closed-ended questions, and learn about concerns not covered in the questionnaire."*

Surveys: Improving Response Rates

When using a survey as an information gathering tool, especially if you are using a convenience sampling method, it is important to obtain as many responses from your population of interest as possible. Below are suggestions on how to increase your survey response rate.

- Send an advance postcard or letter informing the client or your organization's desire to collect more information about your services. Indicate when the survey will arrive or how to access it online, and why you would appreciate their response.

- Do not give up after the first try. A week after the survey has been mailed or the access information has been distributed, send out reminder post cards or e-mails or make reminder telephone calls. If you have not received a survey two weeks after it was mailed, send a second survey or resend the access information via e-mail.

- If mailing surveys, include stamped, self-addressed envelopes to facilitate the return of the surveys and minimize the burden to the respondent.

- Make the survey easy to complete. Completing the survey should be a convenient, positive experience. The questionnaire should have a simple, easy-to-follow format and clear instructions.

- Provide incentives, if possible. Incentives can be effective in attracting a potential respondent's attention, and make him or her more likely to complete the survey.

- Provide multiple options for the administration of the survey. Surveys can be completed on site, over the phone, online, or in person, depending on the resources of the organization and the preferences of the client.

- Ask staff members to encourage client participation in planned survey efforts. However, it is important for staff members to respect a client's wishes not to participate, and should never pressure a client to participate against his or her wishes.

Surveys: Administration

Before Survey Administration

- Identify an appropriate existing instrument or modify or create a new instrument.
- Determine when and how often the survey should be administered.
- Identify your sample. It is important to obtain a sample that can provide information and be representative of your clients' or constituents as a whole.
- Determine mechanisms to maintain participant confidentiality.
- Determine consent process and develop or adapt consent forms.
- Develop a protocol for survey materials to be disseminated and collected.
- If you plan on using a survey administrator, share the protocol instructions with him or her.
- If you plan on using a survey administrator, develop instructions for him or her to read to survey respondents.

During/After Survey Administration

- Keep track of the number of surveys distributed, and the number received.
- Make sure that surveys are administered on the dates scheduled.
- Collect completed surveys.
- Maintain confidentiality by storing the surveys in a secure place.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Key Informant Interviews: An Overview

What is a key informant interview?
A key informant interview is a structured conversation with people who have been selected to speak about a specific topic due to their deep knowledge and understanding of the topic. Information gathered during a key informant interview is often used to provide a context to further information gathering efforts.

Why are key informant interviews useful?

- **By soliciting information from people who are extremely knowledgeable about a specific topic, key informant interviews can provide rich data on the topic of interest.** Information collected through key informant interviews can provide a broad background of knowledge on the topic of interest. Additionally, the information gathered can create a context within which to interpret data gathered through other data collection efforts.
- **People may be more honest in a one-on-one interview than in a larger group (such as a focus group).** When topics may be sensitive, key informant interviews allow for people to share their opinions and experiences honestly.
- **Time spent with one person allows for several questions to be asked and detailed answers to be given.** In contrast to focus groups, the interviewer may not have to guide the Key Informant's answers as more time can be spent with the individual.

What are some limitations of key informant interviews?

- **Conducting key informant interviews may be time consuming.** Depending on how many people are identified as key informants, data collection efforts may not be as quick as surveys or focus groups. For example, if interviews are recorded, for qualitative analysis purposes the interviews may need to be transcribed, which is resource- and time-intensive.
- **Safety of the interviewer must be considered.** As key informant interviews are often conducted one-on-one, precautions must be taken to guarantee the interviewer's safety.
- **Key informants may succumb to social desirability effects.** Key informants may answer in ways they think they interviewer wants them to answer, which can affect whether the information gathered is valid.
- **Information gathered through key informant interviews may not be generalizeable to the entire population.** As you are asking questions of people who are considered knowledgeable on the topic of interest, their opinions may not reflect those of others.

Key Informant Interviews: Developing Primary Area of Interest

Determine the specific topic or set of topics to be explored. Some potential questions that may help you identify topics of interest include the following:

- What is the problem or topic that you are trying to understand?
- Are there sub-areas of interest that are of particular importance?
- Who will be interested in the results?
- How will the information be used?

Key Informant Interviews: Tips for Interview Guide Development

In order to conduct structured discussions with interview participants, the use of an interview guide is recommended. In addition, use of an interview guide will ensure that similar information is being collected from different participants.

- To begin, identify what kind of information you would like to collect. Organizations often have a difficult time distinguishing between *interesting* and *important* kinds of information. As a one hour interview usually consists of 6-8 questions, it is imperative that organizations decide what information is the most important and create questions to elicit this information from participants.

- Develop 6-8 broad, open-ended questions that will encourage interview participants to share their knowledge and experience on the subject of interest.
  - Avoid asking yes/no questions.
  - Use caution when asking "Why" questions as they can make people feel defensive and cause them to take "politically correct" sides on a controversial issue.
  - "What" and "How" questions are the most useful in facilitating a good discussion.

- For each question, identify *probes* that may help stimulate a conversation among interviewees, or hone in on a specific element of the question. Examples of probes include:
  - Can you say more about that?
  - Can you be more specific?
  - Can you give me an example of that?
  - Do others have similar or different experiences to share?

  Probes should be adapted for different types of participants when appropriate. For example, the above probes are not as commonly used for work with children. In place of questions, more declarative statements (e.g., "tell me more about that; "share an example with me") often generate richer responses from children.

- When asking primary questions or probes, avoid phrasing questions in a way that may influence a participants' response. To reduce this possibility, it is important to carefully review and refine the interview guide questions by piloting them with individuals who are similar to your target key informants. Through the refinement process, organizations will have the opportunity to identify questions that may prohibit participants from sharing their honest thoughts and opinions.

- Interview guides can be revised after conducting one or more interview. However, it is best to keep questions that elicit the same type of information, so that all interviews can be looked at in the analysis. It is always useful for interviewers to "debrief" after a few interviews to discuss what went well and what could be improved upon. If it becomes apparent that a question isn't eliciting the desired information, it can be modified or removed entirely. New questions that weren't initially thought of but that emerge through interviews can be added to the guide as well.

Key Informant Interviews : Tips for Recruiting Interview Participants

Selection and recruitment of interview participants is an important part of the interview process. As you identify the kind of information you would like to collect, you must also clearly identify the population and interview participants who can represent that population. Deciding upon the number of interviews to conduct is an important step in the overall interview process.

- Once you have identified the desired outcomes and the information to be obtained, then you can design the interview guide and set the number of interviews. The interview participants may be homogenous or heterogeneous depending on the type of information you want to gather. For instance, you might want responses related to particular types of individuals (e.g. men, women, African Americans, Latinos, gay, lesbian, children, young adults, business leaders, nonprofit leaders, etc…). In this case, your group composition would primarily target one of these populations with perhaps heterogeneity within that population. In another case, having a mixed or balanced group of individuals may be preferable (e.g. older and younger, men and women, etc…).

- The number of interviews will also depend on your target population. If your target population is a "community" then you will want to conduct multiple interviews with various target groups. If your target is a program with 20 participants, interviews with six individuals may be adequate, if these individuals were selected well – that is, diversity within the sample was maximized.

- Individuals must be representative of the target population as well as be willing and able to provide the information you are seeking.

- Recruitment of individuals can take place via a random or convenience sampling; however, purposive sampling (e.g., intentionally selecting participants based on identified purpose and participant characteristics) will probably be best for answering your questions. Either way, the sample needs to be comprised of people who can provide information on the topic of the interview. You may also want to recruit a few extra participants in case there are no shows.

- When the individual is contacted (mail, phone, or in person) to be invited to participate in the interview, you should provide a general explanation of the interview. If there will be incentives (e.g. money) or a meal provided this should also be noted. Provide written confirmations, if possible, and reminders closer to the date of the interview.

- Select days, times, and locations that are convenient for your target population, and remove any barriers that may prohibit participation (e.g. provide transportation or childcare).

- Provide incentives (e.g., gift cards or entry into a drawing) if possible. Incentives can be effective in attracting a potential respondent's attention, and make him or her more likely to participate.

Key Informant Interviews: Tips for Conducting the Interviews

Before the Interview

- Create the interview guide.
- Know how to use the recording device and test it before each interview.
- Make sure that you have enough available recording space on the device for each interview.
- Be familiar with interviewer tips.
- Review interview questions, so that you know them well and do not have to read them word for word.
- Confirm the interview a day or two in advance.

During The Interview

- Be on time for the interview. Conduct the interview in person.
- Conduct the interview in a quiet and semi-private place. It is important to keep outside noise to a minimum to protect the quality of the recording. It also is important to protect confidentiality.
- Provide a brief background on the study (why you are conducting interviews). Be sure to include information about the purpose of the study, how the information will be used and reported, and his or her rights as a participant (see section on Ethics above for more information).
- Ask the respondent if he or she will agree to participate.
  - Have the individual sign their name.
  - Ask the respondent if he or she is willing to be recorded. Explain that no one will hear the recording except individuals associated with the research efforts and that confidentiality will be protected. Explain that you would like to record the interview so that you don't have to take notes.
- Make sure that you attend to any questions the participant may have before starting the interview. Encourage asking questions at any time during the interview.
- Turn recorder on and check the recorder occasionally to make sure that it is functioning.
- Ask the questions in the interview guide. Be sure to cover all the questions in the interview guide that the respondent is willing to answer. If the respondent answers a question in one word or with a single sentence, ask the question in a new way and "probe" to help them expand on their thoughts.
- In some cases, as you go through the interview guide, you may notice that the respondent has already addressed a question in a previous answer. It is still important to ask the question, as they may not have shared everything around that topic. One way of handling this situation is to paraphrase what they have already said about the topic and then ask the question in the interview guide.

After the Interview

- Thank the respondent for their participation.
- Check the quality of the recording. If there is a problem, immediately write down everything you remember them telling you about each of the questions.

Key Informant Interviews: Additional Considerations

Create an Open Environment
- Feel free to make small chat with the person you are going to interview. It is important to establish rapport, but be respectful of the key informant's time.
- Remind the key informant of the purpose of the interview, and make sure that any questions they have are addressed either before or during the interview.
- Do not assume answers.
- Do not pass judgments.
- Attempt to establish rapport throughout the interview.
- Listen to what the participant has to say about the topic of interest.

Interviewing People You Know
- It can be difficult to convince someone you know that you will suddenly be objective and unbiased about his or her thoughts, beliefs and feelings.
- With people you know, it is more difficult to maintain the professional competence of a researcher, because they know you from different settings.
- Confidentiality concerns: Someone you know may be more reluctant to speak openly. He or she may feel that confidentiality would be difficult for you to maintain. You also may experience this difficulty, wanting to share information with family and friends. However, it is critical to maintain the confidentiality standards that were established with the participant in the consenting process.

Recording vs. Note Taking
- When possible, it is preferable to record an interview so that the key informant's comments, in their own words, can be transcribed and reviewed. It is also easier to maintain rapport and to ask follow-up questions if needed if the interviewer is free to focus fully on the key informant's comments.
- If a person does not want to have their interview recorded, or feels uncomfortable, notes can be taken during the interview by the interviewer or his/her colleague.

Note Taking Methods
- Before the interviews, prepare a template of the interview questions and a key of abbreviations so that you can accurately capture the key informant's comments in a short amount of time.
- If possible, have two interviewers conducting the interview: one interviewer can ask questions and the other can take notes without interrupting the interview.
- Don't try to write everything down. As the note taker, try to capture what the key informant is saying with short quotes and summaries of their comments.
- Use parentheses to note any special emotions, facial expressions, or interpretations.
- At the end of the interview, review the notes with the key informant to see if their thoughts and comments were accurately recorded.

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus Groups: An Overview

Focus groups are used to understand diverse perspectives on the topic of interest and generally have between seven and ten participants. Groups with fewer than seven participants may not provide enough information while groups larger than ten may be hard to manage and record.

Why are focus groups useful?

- **Group dialogue tends to generate a lot of rich information,** as participants tend to get each other talking about different ways of experiencing or thinking about something.
- **Focus groups elicit information from people who can provide unique insights.** Focus groups provide information directly from individuals who are most involved in an issue or hold expert knowledge about a topic of which little is known among researchers.
- **Focus groups provide a representation of diverse opinions and ideas.**
- **Focus groups provide a relatively low cost and efficient way to generate a great deal of information.**

What are some limitations of focus groups?

- **Focus groups are susceptible to facilitator bias,** which can affect whether information about what participants feel and think is shared (validity of findings).
- **Discussions can be sidetracked or dominated by a few vocal individuals.**
- **The information gathered through focus groups often has limited generalizability to a whole population.**

Focus Groups: Developing Primary Areas of Interest

Primary steps for focus group development are often the same as those for developing key informant interviews. First you will need to determine the specific topic or set of topics to be explored. Some potential questions that may help you identify topics of interest include the following:

- What is the problem or topic that you are trying to understand?
- Are there sub-areas of interest that are of particular importance?
- Who will be interested in the results?
- How will the information be used?

Focus Groups: Tips for Focus Group Guide Development

In order to conduct a structured discussion with focus group participants, the use of a focus group guide is recommended. If your organization will be holding more than one focus group, use of a focus group guide will ensure that similar information is being collected from different focus group participants.

- To begin, identify what kind of information you would like to collect. Organizations often have a difficult time distinguishing between *interesting* and *important* kinds of information. As a 1 ½ hour focus group usually consists of 5-6 main questions, it is imperative that organizations decide what is important information and create questions to elicit this information from participants.

- Develop 5-6 broad, open-ended questions that will encourage focus group participants to share their knowledge and experience on the subject of interest.
  - Avoid asking yes/no questions.
  - Use caution when asking "Why" questions as they can make people feel defensive and cause them to take "politically correct" sides on a controversial issue.
  - "What" and "How" questions are the most useful in facilitating a good discussion.
  - Keep the broad, open-ended question simple. Sometimes there is a tendency for facilitators to provide lengthy discussions about the question (e.g., the rationale, background information, etc.). The extraneous information sometimes will stifle spontaneous thoughts and responses from focus group members, or cause them to focus on extraneous details instead of the core question.

- For each question, identify *probes* or sub-questions that may help stimulate a conversation among focus group participants, or hone in on a specific element of the question.

- When asking primary questions or probes, avoid phrasing questions in a way that may influence a participants' response. Through the development of focus group guides, organizations will have the opportunity to identify questions that may prohibit participants from sharing their honest thoughts and opinions.

- Focus group guides can be revised after conducting one or more focus groups. It is always useful for facilitators to "debrief" after focus groups to discuss what went well and what could be improved upon. If it becomes apparent that a question isn't eliciting the desired information, it can be modified or removed entirely. New questions that weren't initially thought of but that emerge through focus groups can be added to the guide as well.

Focus Groups: Tips for Recruiting Focus Group Participants

Selection and recruitment of focus group participants is an important part of the focus group process. As you identify the kind of information you would like to collect, you must also clearly identify the population and focus group participants who can represent that population. Deciding the composition and number of focus groups to conduct is an important step in the overall focus group process.

- Once you have identified the desired outcomes and the information to be obtained, then you can design the group composition and set the number of focus groups. A focus group tends to be homogenous with regards to population characteristics and allows one to explore the range of attitudes and beliefs and perspectives within that group. For instance, you might want responses related to particular types of individuals (e.g. men, women, African Americans, Latinos, gay, lesbian, children, young adults, business leaders, nonprofit leaders, etc…).

- The group composition and number of focus groups will also depend on your target population. If your target population is a "community" then you will want to conduct multiple focus groups with various target groups. If your target is a program with 20 participants, one focus group of six individuals may be adequate.

- Individuals must be representative of the target population as well as be willing and able to provide the information you are seeking.

- Recruitment of individuals can take place via a random or convenience sampling; however, purposive sampling is likely preferred (both of these terms are further explained in the Survey section of the toolkit). Either way, the sample should be comprised of people who can provide information and insight or expertise on the topic of the focus group. As with key informant interviews, you may also want to recruit a few extra participants in case there are no shows.

- When the individual is contacted (mail, phone, or in person) to be invited to participate in the focus group, you should provide a general explanation of the focus group. If there will be incentives or a meal provided this should also be noted. Incentives can be effective in attracting a potential respondent's attention, and make him or her more likely to participate. Provide written confirmations, if possible, and reminders closer to the date of the focus group.

- Select days, times, and locations that are convenient for your target population, and remove any barriers that may prohibit participation (e.g. provide transportation or childcare).

Focus Groups: Tips for Conducting Focus Groups

Before the Focus Group

- Create the focus group guide.
- Know how to use the recording device and test it before each session.
- Make sure that you have enough available recording space on the device for each interview.
- Review interview questions and define key terms. Review the focus group guide ahead of time and identify words that you think participants may have a difficult time understanding without a little explanation. When it is time to ask the focus group question with the difficult or confusing term, explain to participants what you mean by the term. Keep your explanation as neutral as possible.
- Obtain written consent, make sure participants understand their rights, and ensure them that their personal names and identifying information will not be revealed in any public way. If participants are unable or unwilling to give written consent, they may give verbal consent by stating their name and agreement to participate on a tape recording.
- Establish rapport.

During the Focus Group

- Follow the focus group guide. It is helpful to follow the focus group guide as much as possible when facilitating a focus group, to increase the credibility of the research results. Using a guide also increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection more efficient.
- Guide the participants in discussion. If participants give incomplete or irrelevant answers, the facilitator can ask their own questions to help obtain fuller, clearer responses. A few suggested techniques are:
    - Repeat the question – repetition gives more time to think.
    - Pause for the answer – a thoughtful nod or expectant look can convey that you want a fuller answer.
    - Repeat or rephrase the reply – hearing it again sometimes stimulates conversation.
    - Ask when, what, where, which, and how questions – they provoke more detailed information.
    - Use neutral comments such as "Anything else?"

  It is also not uncommon for a few individuals to dominate the discussion. Sometimes in mixed gender groups for example, one gender may tend to speak more than the other. To balance participation and ensure that every participant has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, you might want to consider the following strategies:
    - Address questions to individuals who are reluctant to talk
    - Give nonverbal cues (look in another direction/at other participants or stop taking notes when an individual talks for an extended period)
    - Politely summarize the point, then refocus the discussion; you can remind the group that you want to be sure everyone has a chance to participate and that you want to allow adequate time for all questions

- Minimize pressure to conform to a dominant view point. When an idea is being accepted without any general discussion or disagreement, more than likely group pressure to conform to a single viewpoint has occurred. To minimize this, the facilitator should probe for alternative views. For example, the facilitator can raise another issue, or say, "We have had an interesting discussion, but let's explore other ideas or points of view. Has anyone had a different experience that they wish to share?".

- Record the discussion. Ideally, focus group discussions will be recorded using both recording equipment and hand-written notes by someone aside from the facilitator. Hand-written notes should be extensive and accurately reflect the content of the discussion, as well as any observations you have about what went well and did not go well about the discussion. After recording the focus group, write down all the major thoughts and comments you think are important for someone who was not there to know about what was said.

After the Focus Group

- Thank the participants for their time and views.
- Check the quality of the recording. If there is a problem, immediately write down everything

Focus Groups: Effective Focus Group Facilitation

Roles and Responsibilities of the Facilitator

- Keep participants focused, engaged, attentive and interested
- Monitor time and use limited time effectively
- Use prompts and probes to stimulate discussion
- Use the interview and focus group guides effectively to ensure all topics are covered
- Politely and diplomatically enforce ground rules:
    - Make sure everyone participates and at a level that is comfortable
    - Limit side conversations
    - Encourage one person to speak at a time
- When participants aren't talking, ask them whether they need the question restated or explained
- Don't let arguments between participants develop
- Bring the following materials for the focus group:
    - Recording equipment: recorder, extension cord, extra batteries, etc.
    - Focus group packet of consent forms, participant information forms and focus group documentation sheet
    - If desired, flip charts with extra paper and different colors of markers
- If unable to record, document major ideas on flip chart paper and write down your thoughts and observations about group dynamics write after the focus group

Effective Facilitators

- Have good listening skills
- Have good observation skills
- Have good speaking skills
- Can foster open and honest dialogue among diverse groups and individuals
- Can remain impartial (i.e., do not give her/his opinions about topics, because this can influence what people say)
- Can encourage participation when someone is reluctant to speak up
- Can manage participants who dominate the conversation
- Are sensitive to gender and cultural issues
- Are sensitive to differences in power among and within groups

Working with Different Types of Participants

Different types of participants can make a focus group engaging, but they can also pose a challenge for facilitators. The following are some examples of common situations that can occur and what you can do when you encounter these various types of participants.

- **Self-Appointed Experts.** Thank them for their knowledge and redirect question to the rest of the group

- **Dominant Talkers.** If one participant tries to dominate the session, the moderator should invite each person to speak in turn or use a round robin approach.

- **Shy Participants.** Respect someone's right to be quiet, but do give them a chance to share their ideas 1-to-1. Use differences of opinion as a topic of discussion - the moderator should avoid taking sides. Address questions to those reluctant to speak while being sensitive to potential discomfort.

- **Ramblers.** Intervene, politely summarize and refocus. Use nonverbal cues; redirect.

- **Side Talking/Side Conversation.** Remind the group or individuals about the ground rules

More on Interviews and Focus Groups

Building Rapport

Building rapport is important to the focus group and interview process, because it can dramatically influence whether or not the participants answer and how they answer the questions they are asked.

- **In the Beginning Interviews and Focus Groups.** Explain that the idea of the interview or focus group is to learn about participant's perspectives, insights and knowledge about the topic of interest.

- **Listening.** In the first few minutes of the focus group or interview, be accepting and curious, and show the participants that you are a person who is prepared and willing to listen to them with interest. At the same time, it is important to make sure that participants stay focused. Listen first, but re-ask the question if participants go too far off topic.

- **You Are There To Learn From Them.** Also, let the participants know that you are there to learn from them. Acknowledging your interest in them as "experts" will be key to setting the tone for the focus group.

- **Your Role.** It is important to present yourself as someone there to do research rather than as a friend. There is an element of formality in doing so; however, taking their contribution seriously does not have to be at odds with building rapport. This formality communicates to the participants that their participation is important.

- **Balance Rapport and Professionalism.** Part of your role is to achieve a balance between building rapport with the participants and professionalism. Your role during the focus group or interview is not to be a good conversationalist or a friend who provides feedback, but to be a professional. You will want to achieve a balance between being formal and casual during your focus groups. If you are too formal, the respondents may feel intimidated by you and not be as willing to reveal information. By being too casual, the respondents may not see you as someone who is prepared to take what they have to say seriously.

Keeping Participants Talking

- **Probing.** As a general rule, you want to interrupt the focus group or interview participants as little as possible. If you feel that you need to follow-up with something they said by using probes, make a mental note of it and ask them about it when they have finished their thought.

- **Finishing Their Thoughts.** Again, you want to show the participants that you are there to listen to what they have to say. Interrupting them may influence how they answer and whether they answer other questions you ask. If a participant strays off course, encourage them to finish their thought. After they have finished their thought, it is appropriate to bring them back to the question you asked to make sure that they have answered it completely.

Listening to Interview and Focus Group Participants

The guidelines to conducting interviews and focus groups are closely connected to building rapport. These guidelines include communicating to the participants that you are listening to them as well as these strategies: neutrality, silence, and guidance.

- **Show Participants That You Are Listening.** You will want to focus all your efforts on listening to the participants so that you will be able to probe at appropriate points during the conversation. This includes noticing body posture and facial gestures and any changes in their nonverbal language. If the participant feels that you are not listening to them with great care, they may not elaborate or provide much detail with their answers.

- **Staying Neutral.** While paying attention to the participants you also want to remain as neutral as possible, even if you have a strong opinion about something. Use phrases such as "Thank you. That is helpful." Avoid shaking your head or murmuring "right" – this may inadvertently suggest to participants that you are not interested if they have a different point of view.

- **Gathering Honest Information.** You want to gather information that is as honest as possible. If a participant senses that you have an opinion, they may want to change their responses to ones that seem desirable to you rather than what they truly believe or feel about a topic.

- **Silence is Acceptable.** Conducting an interview or a focus group is different than typical conversations we have with people. Something to keep in mind is that silence is acceptable. It is important not to get impatient during your focus groups or interviews even though you may tend to want to fill the pauses in conversation.

- **Silence Encourages Elaboration.** Allowing silence at times encourages elaboration by the respondents, because it gives them a chance to think about what they want to say. More often than not, participants will fill the silence with more information.

- **Not Rushing the Interview or Focus Group Participants.** You want to achieve a balance between collecting necessary information and gathering important data that have not been anticipated. Sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference until you ask clarifying questions or probes. Again, you want to make sure that you interrupt the participants as little as possible and not rush them with their answers while keeping them on course with the interview guide.

- **Asking Clarifying Questions.** Guidance includes giving the interview and focus group participants clues as to how specific you would like their answers to be and asking them for clarification, details, and examples. Make small steps in your questioning, not big leaps. This way you will get more detail and elaboration from them and will keep you from making assumptions about what they have shared.

- **Monitoring Time.** As a part of guidance you also want to achieve a balance between following the interview or focus group guide, monitoring time, and asking the respondents for more detail through probing. By arriving and leaving on time you are presenting yourself as a professional, being considerate of their time, and building rapport.

Individuals tend to want to talk about their experiences and may go on and on about them. As the facilitator, your job is to politely move the interview or focus group forward when what the respondent is sharing is less useful given your research questions. At times, you may want to acknowledge that your time together is waning, and there are some other aspects of their experience that you want to be sure you have time to learn about and explore, and, for this reason, you are going to move on.

If you do run out of time before you have covered all the questions in the guide, be sure to use your remaining time asking and exploring only the most important questions remaining. The more familiar you are with the interview or focus group guide, the easier it will be for you to prioritize particular questions and to recognize when participants already have provided relevant information (indeed, adequately answered) questions you have not yet asked. This will ensure that your questions do not feel redundant to the participant and that the interview, overall, flows smoothly and efficiently.

Probes

Probes are an important part of conducting interviews and focus groups and have two main purposes: to help clarify what a participant has said and to help get more detailed information on topics of interest. Probes allow the participants to provide more than just a one-sentence answer to the questions you ask.

Some examples of general probes used to help clarify what a respondent has said include:

"Please tell me (more) about that…"
"Could you explain what you mean by…"
"Can you tell me something else about…"
"Can you tell me more about that experience…"

- **Using Probes for Clarification**
  - **Seeing Things from Their Perspective.** Using probes for clarification helps you to gather good information while avoiding the assumption that you understand the meaning of a phrase or the perspective of the participants. Probes such as the ones above help you see things from the perspective of the person being questioned while building rapport.
  - **Probes Help Avoid Making Assumptions.** Probes also help you make small steps in your questioning, not big leaps, avoiding the mistake of making assumptions about what the participant has shared or rushing them in their answers.

- **Probes and Building Rapport**

The use of appropriate probes is also connected to building rapport with the interview and focus group participants.

  - **The Participants are the Experts.** Using probes to clarify what the interview or focus group participants have said reinforces the fact that you are there to learn from them as "experts." Good probes let the participants know that you are listening to their answers and that you would like to know more detail about where they are coming from about the topic.

- **Good Probing is *Not* Leading**

It is important to avoid asking questions that are leading, meaning that they reflect your opinions or assumptions about a topic.

  - **Avoid Asking Leading Questions.** An example of a leading question is "Don't you think…" This presents to the interview or focus group participants that you have an opinion, not that you are there to learn from them as an unbiased listener. This type of questioning may lead the participants to answer questions according to what you expect to hear, rather than how they really feel. The participants may also want you to look at them in a favorable way, matching your opinions rather than sharing what they truly believe or have experienced. So it is very important to stay as neutral as possible during the focus group. Examples of leading questions:

    <u>Too leading:</u> "Would you agree that…"

    <u>Instead, you could say</u>: "What do you think about…"

    <u>Too leading:</u> "Do you think that…?"

    <u>Instead, you could say</u>: "What are your beliefs about…?"

    <u>Too leading:</u> "When will you…?"
    This assumes that the person you are interviewing has the intention of doing something, but that may not be true.

    <u>Instead, you could say</u>: Another way to approach this question would be to say, "Do you plan on…?"

    <u>Too leading:</u> "How important do you believe it is…?"
    Participants may or may not think the issue is important, so start by simply asking if they think the issue is important, and probe based on their answer to that question.

<u>Difficult Situations</u>

Difficult situations may arise during your interview or focus group. The following are some examples of common situations that can occur and what you can do to keep your interview or focus group going smoothly.

- **What happens if a focus group respondent skips ahead, providing information relevant to a question that I haven't gotten to yet?** At times respondents may skip topics or move ahead of where you are in the guide. You do not want to interrupt; rather, let participants finish their thoughts and remain an interested listener. You will want to use probes to get detailed information from them on the topic at-hand, and then gently return to the topic of interest, falling back on the guide. If they have already answered a question when you get to it, you will still want to ask the question if time, as participants may have more to say. You will want to make sure that all of the topics are discussed as completely as possible during the interview or focus group.

- **What do I do if I ask a question and a participant says that they do not feel comfortable answering it?** A participant may not feel comfortable answering a question from the focus group or interview guide. This may be related to confidentiality and informed consent, or it may relate to embarrassment due to the sensitive nature of the questions. At the beginning of the group or interview, you want to make it clear that participants may decline to answer a question(s) or choose to stop their participation at any time. If a participant displays signs of discomfort with the subject matter, you will want to acknowledge again that the topic is sensitive, their experience and opinions are valuable, but they can choose not to answer the question. If the respondent does not want to answer the question, you want to say "thank you" and that you acknowledge and appreciate their honesty.

- **What do I do if someone in the group wants to discontinue their participation in the interview or focus group?** If a participant wishes to discontinue the interview or focus group altogether, end the interview or allow the person to leave the group promptly. Follow up with the person (either immediately at the time of the interview or following the focus group outside) to ask if they have any questions or feedback to share with you.

- **What do I do in a focus group if someone is dominating the conversation?** Focus groups, ideally, allow researchers to collect the opinions and ideas of a variety of people. If someone is doing a lot of the talking, however, this may prevent others from contributing their thoughts, and limits the usefulness of the focus group. It is important to notice when this is happening and do what you can to ensure other people have the opportunity to contribute. You should encourage participation even if participants seem reluctant at first, or insist that others have already shared what they would have said. It is important to have people say things in their own words as much as possible. If someone is dominating the conversation, you might want to respectfully acknowledge their contribution, and thank them, saying something like, "I really appreciate your comments." Then make direct eye contact with other people and ask something like, "I'm very interested in hearing how other people are feeling about this issue" or "It's very interesting to get a variety of perspectives, and I would like to hear from other people as well." You can also try a round robin approach to ensure that everyone has an identified chance to contribute.

- **What do I do if people in a focus group are having side conversations (i.e., conversations among themselves)?** If people are having conversations among themselves, it can disrupt the focus group by making the other participants feel uncomfortable, making it hard for people to hear what others are saying, and making it hard for the facilitator to respond to what is being shared. One of the best ways to handle this situation is to address it before the focus group begins, when you tell the participants about focus group ground rules. Stress that it is *very* important not to have side conversations as it interferes with the group discussion and also poses challenges for recording the discussion. If side conversations do occur during a focus group, do not stop the conversation abruptly. You might respectfully remind people of the ground rules and ask that people finish their conversations and rejoin the larger group discussion taking place. This kind of disruption may also signal that a break is needed; you might want to suggest no more than a five minute break so that people can use the restroom or stretch. It will be important to make sure people know at one time the focus group will continue and be proactive about bringing people back together so that the focus group can re-convene.

- **What do I do if an interview participant seems confused by a question or no one responds to a question in a focus group?**

  - **Did you ask a question that was difficult for the participant(s) to understand?** If you think this might be the case, you might try asking the question in a different way. The more familiar you are with the research objectives of a particular interview or focus group, the more successful you will be in rephrasing or rewording a question in an appropriate way that ensures that salient issues are explored and the research integrity of the group discussion is maintained.

  - **Do you think you might have asked a politically sensitive question (i.e., something that people are afraid to answer honestly because it might make other people angry)?** If you think this might be the problem, you might move to a different question or topic that is less sensitive and try coming back to the topic later. You could also use probes that might get at aspects of the sensitive topic but less directly, rephrase the question, or ask a slightly different question. These approaches may help make it possible to gather important information while posing questions that feel less controversial to the group.

  - **Are people tired of talking about the topic and/or do they have no more to say about a topic?** In this case, it may be important to simply state, "Is there anything else that you would like to share? [pause] If not, we can move on to our next question." This communicates to the participant(s) that this is their opportunity to contribute any additional thoughts and allows you to move on to the next topic more naturally and politely. If you aren't certain that you have all of the information you want on a topic, be aware that there may be an opportunity to elicit salient information in probing that occurs for other questions. Rather than trying to force things, know that there may be opportunities to explore important linkages and connections in subsequent discussion.

  - **Are people feeling uncomfortable about talking?** This typically occurs at the beginning of an interview or focus group. It is less likely to occur if the facilitator/interviewer is able to put people at ease in the beginning of the interview or group by setting a comfortable tone; for focus groups it is often helpful to start with a brief icebreaker activity. If, however, participant discomfort with sharing continues to be an issue, you may need to back up and do a little work to make the participant(s) feel more comfortable. Take a few moments to talk about easier topics, things that participants may be more familiar with or comfortable talking about, or things that you know are particularly interesting to them. This may help people begin to feel more comfortable, particularly talking in a group setting.

    If the participant(s) do not respond immediately to a question, and you aren't sure exactly what the problem is, it's okay sometimes to just wait it out. Be quiet for a moment and allow people time to think. Often, participants will eventually speak up if given a bit of time, either to answer the question or to ask a question that allows you to have a better understanding of the silence.

Concluding the Interview or Focus Group

- **Thanking Them for Their Participation.** Remember to thank the participants for their time and participation. Let them know that the information they have shared is valuable for this project.

- **Future Contact.** Related to rapport, it is important to end the focus group or interview on a positive note and to get the participants to agree to be contacted again in the future if necessary. You may need to contact them to clarify something they said. If you promise to do something for them such as find out more information or share some of the findings of the study, make sure you keep those promises.

DATA ANALYSIS

Survey Analysis Basic Guidelines

- Identify who will compile the information gathered during the information gathering efforts. Initial analysis does not have to be especially complex or difficult, but will require basic math skills.
- If you decide to use internal resources to analyze the data, create a spreadsheet using software such as Microsoft Excel for quantitative data (Likert scale or multiple choice responses), and a spreadsheet for qualitative data (open-ended questions). This allows you to sort and categorize information easily, which is helpful for identifying patterns.
- When compiling survey information, assign a number to each survey (i.e., a participant ID). Enter that number into a column in the spreadsheet and then associate all answers from that survey with their assigned number. Entering the survey number into the spreadsheet allows you to go back to the answers from a particular survey if you need any clarifying information later.

- **Analyzing <u>quantitative</u> data**
  - Average (or Mean) scores: To determine an average score of a close-ended question that utilized a Likert scale, simply add all the scores given in response to a question, and divide that number by the total number of respondents who answered that question.
    - If some respondents did not answer the question, do not divide the question by the total number of respondents. This will lower the average score because people who did not respond are averaged in as having reported a score of 0.
  - Percentages (or Frequencies): You may wish to report the percentage of people who responded to a question in a certain (usually favorable) way. For example, if your survey asks clients to rate their overall experience with your organization on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest (strongly dissatisfied) and 5 is the highest (strongly satisfied), you can take the number of people who responded with a 5, and divide that number by the total number of responses to that question. So, if you received 50 surveys, and 45 of the respondents indicated that they were "strongly satisfied", you could divide 45 by 50, multiply that number by 100, and say that 90% of your clients (at least those who completed the survey) are strongly satisfied with their experience with your organization.

- **Analyzing <u>qualitative</u> data**
  - Analyzing qualitative data involves comprehensively examining narrative text responses to identify themes or to extract pertinent information to answer your research questions. It is important to analyze the information in a systematic way, as it is easier to lose objectivity and focus in on only certain types of responses. Often this analysis requires reviewing the text several times and sorting/categorizing statements into themes. Often the number of statements or times themes or topics are mentioned is then calculated in order to identify the most commonly mentioned points of information.
  - Identify themes: Often times, common themes will emerge from a group of comments gathered from the open-ended questions on a survey.
  - Verbatim Responses: Sometimes using the respondents' own written words can be very powerful and effectively support recommendations based upon quantitative data. However,

be sure to mask personal information when sharing these responses to maintain the respondent's confidentiality.
  - Insightful Comments/Suggestions: Some survey respondents may make particularly astute observations or comments that don't appear in other survey responses. These comments can be very useful in the development of any plans that emerge from your information gathering efforts.

Focus Group and Interview Analysis Basic Guidelines

- Qualitative data is collected from focus groups, interviews and open-ended survey questions, which allow you to gather individual accounts, opinions, comments and suggestions that are outside of more constricting, close-ended questions (e.g. "circle the number from 1 to 5 that best describes your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements"). Focus groups and interviews in particular allow for a more in depth look into the questions that you, as an organization are seeking to have answered. It may also provide information and suggestions that you were not previously aware of or had not considered.

- As a general guideline, it is good to conduct multiple focus groups and interviews to hear from as representative a group (or interviewees) as possible. However, the number of each will depend greatly on your target population (the people you aim to serve) as well as the resources you have available.

- Once you have conducted your focus groups and interviews, you will have notes from each and you may also have transcripts. If you did tape record the discussions or interviews, it is a good idea (when resources are available) to transcribe them so you have verbatim record of each. Even if you are able to transcribe the focus groups and interviews, you will still want to use the notes in the analysis to provide context to the transcripts.

Analyzing your Focus Group Data

When conducting qualitative data analysis, there are specific steps that should be followed to ensure the data collected is being accurately reported and that valid conclusions from the data are made. Below is a list of steps involved with analyzing the focus group and interview data that you have collected.

- **Working as a Team**
  - Analyzing focus group and interview data is best done as a team. This allows you to assign different transcripts or notes to individuals for the main reading and have an additional person read each focus group or interview.
  - Often focus group and interview transcripts can be over 20 pages in length. The team structure helps to ensure that interesting information is not left out, and when confusions arise they can be discussed with another person.
  - If there are subgroups within the focus groups or interviews, such as those, for instance, that were conducted with only women, only youth, only Latinos, etc., it may be best to put two individuals on one of these subgroups so they can discuss findings and/or confusions within the subgroup.

- When questions or confusions arise when reading one focus group, they should be brought to the entire team as others may have found similar issues in the transcripts or notes they are reviewing.
- It is important to remember that unlike quantitative data, qualitative data has more room for interpretation. Individuals will pick up on different details or read responses differently. Therefore, having two people read the same focus group or interview and then having an open discussion as a team will help to ensure that the data is read correctly and the same across all of the focus groups and interviews, thus creating reliability in your analytic process.

- **Creating Themes or "Buckets"**
  - Before looking at the focus group and interview transcripts and/or notes (depending on which method(s) you chose to use), the analytic team should meet to review the focus group and interview guides and create a list of themes that they anticipate finding in the information collected; these will often come from the questions asked on the guide. The process of creating the themes or "buckets" will be done in several rounds.
  - During the initial meeting, a general outline should be decided upon by reviewing the questions that were asked on the guide and anticipating the information that was collected. Remember, the focus group guide was created to help you answer a series of questions that you had about the services that you were or should provide, or an issue within the community that you wanted to better understand. Going through each of the questions as a team will be very helpful in creating the themes.
  - If more than one version of the focus group or interview guide was used for different subgroups of people that you are analyzing you will need to consider this in the process of creating the themes as well. In this meeting, the group should decide which questions are separate and if they want to report on the entire population that participated and/or the individual subgroups. While it is interesting to compare information found by subgroups, it may also be advantageous to look at the entire group.
  - During this process, it is best to start off general and then specify themes as the rounds of analysis continue. It is common to create initial themes, then read through the data and find that there are other common themes you did not anticipate. At that point, those additional themes can be defined as a group.

- **Coding**
  - Coding is the process of identifying each place, in the focus group or interview transcript (or notes), that a different theme arises. By choosing individual symbols, colors, or numbers for each of the themes outlined in the meetings, you will mark the transcript to indicate when information associated with a particular theme is mentioned.
  - Some individuals choose to use colored pencils while others may choose to write the number of the theme near the sentence or paragraph associated with that theme.
  - Another option that some people like is to create a document (in either Word or Excel) where you can copy and paste portions of transcripts under each theme. If you choose this method, it is very important to make sure you know which focus group/interview each section or comment comes from.
  - It is not important which way you choose to mark the transcript; the purpose of coding is so you will remember which sentence, phrase, or paragraph goes with which theme and be able to report out and discuss your findings with the team.

- **Recreating Themes or "Buckets"**
  - Before the second meeting, all of the individuals on the team should choose and read just one of the focus groups or interviews and determine if or which of the themes outlined in the initial meeting line up with the themes discussed in the actual focus groups. Make note of themes that should be added, deleted, or altered.
  - During the second meeting, the team can discuss how they each coded the transcript and if the initial themes captured the data. From this discussion, the group can adjust or add to the previous themes to better fit the data collected. Note that some themes may be removed if they are not applicable to a majority of transcripts. With a more defined list of themes, individuals should then read and code all of the focus groups or interviews assigned to them, including a re-coding of the first transcript coded.
  - After each individual has read and "coded" the themes found in their assigned focus groups or interviews, they should meet and discuss their findings with the other person who was assigned to code the same transcripts. If subgroups (mentioned above) are applicable, this meeting will be particularly helpful to discuss these findings before reporting to the entire team.
  - Before the final meeting it may be helpful to have each individual make their own table or Word document that outlines their findings under each theme across the different focus groups or interviews that they were responsible for reading.
  - Throughout the process it may be necessary to read each transcript or set of notes more than once.

- **Final Analysis**
  - The final team meeting will include time to go through each of the themes and see what each person has found. To facilitate aggregating the information, having someone record the findings during the meeting is highly recommended.
  - Going through each of the themes one by one, the group will share their individual findings, focusing on those that appear in more than one group or seem to be particularly interesting or important.
  - The group will work together to synthesize their findings and help the recorder accurately track what is decided upon. If individuals completed a table or Word document, it is a good idea to give this to the recorder after the meeting in case they have questions or want to review findings from person to person.
  - Once all of the themes have been synthesized, the group may want to meet again to decide if and how they want to share the information and what this means to the organization.
  - Usually it is best if one person takes the lead on formally writing up the analysis for a report. This can take many forms depending on the report and its requirements, but a basic format is to discuss the themes, each in their own paragraph or bullet, and pull in one to three (depending on the number you have) illustrative quotes. Keep in mind, for the confidentiality of your participants, you will not report who made the comment.
    - Some example language for summarizing themes might include: "many parents from the program who participated in the focus group discussed problems they experience when talking to their kids about drug and alcohol use. These included…." "Participants appeared to agree that . . . . ."

Additional Considerations for Analysis

Whether completing quantitative or qualitative analysis, there are a few considerations that should be taken into account to ensure accurate data reporting.

- Be sure to look carefully at any demographic information (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age, geographical area, etc.) collected about your participants in order to accurately describe both your sample, and how representative/generalizable your findings are to a larger population.
- In qualitative analysis, there will be many comments and individual responses outside of your themes on each transcript. An analysis is meant to understand common themes across individuals and groups, which is why you attempt to get as representative a sample as possible. However, there are times when you will find particular unique comments useful (while perhaps not a common theme across the majority of participants) and feel it is important to include them in the write-up of your analysis. When this is true, you should qualify that it was not a common theme, but an important comment. You can do this by using language such as "although it was not a common theme across participants, one/a few participant(s) did note…."
- When reading participant comments from surveys, focus groups or interviews, be sure that you are reading responses correctly; if the analyzing group/team is not entirely sure what a participant is saying then it is usually best to leave the comment out of the analysis instead of trying to guess what the person "meant to say." This maintains the validity of your analytic process.
- When evaluating any type of data, it may be difficult at times to be unbiased and not to read into what the data or the individual has stated, especially in the case of qualitative data. It is important to ensure that you are not using your own knowledge or anticipated notions of results to inaccurately portray the data.
- Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis require working as a team. Teamwork is particularly important for qualitative analysis as it can take several rounds of "grouping" or "coding"; interpretation and reporting of quantitative data can benefit from various perspectives as well.