



**Sexual Assault**  
**DEMONSTRATION INITIATIVE**  
Enhancing Sexual Assault Services

# LISTENING TO OUR COMMUNITIES

A Guide for Focus Groups

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# LISTENING TO OUR COMMUNITIES

## A Guide for Focus Groups

This guide is part of the *National Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative Toolkit* on community assessment approaches to support the growth of sexual assault services within multi-service programs. It includes tips for conducting focus groups specific to sexual violence to make sure that community stories are gathered effectively. Additional tools for conducting focus groups and interviews are also available as part of this toolkit at [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org).

### INTRODUCTION

Although a community assessment does not fall under the formal category of “research,” it is important that standards for ethical practices are adhered to, including:

- Participation must be voluntary
- Participants must be informed about the subject of the focus group
- Minimal identifying information should be collected and the identities of participants be kept confidential.

### WHO TO INVITE

Focus groups are most effective when the participants have some common background or experiences.

Being social service providers allows this commonality among focus group participants. However, it would be important not to include other systems personnel such as law enforcement or medical providers in this group. They should have separate groups with questions tailored to their experiences.





## INVITATIONS

Invitations should reflect the philosophy and values of your agency. The community assessment will not only inform the enhancement of services; it is also a way in and of itself to raise visibility of sexual assault services. Focus groups are another opportunity to build relationships across organizations and demonstrate your agency's leadership on sexual violence.

Invitations may be most effective if they:

- Refer to past connections with the organization or individual (e.g., past joint work, collaboration on community coalitions, donations the organization has made, ways their work complements your agency's work, etc.).
- Let them know that your agency is working on enhancing services specifically to survivors of sexual violence.
- Acknowledge that while your work on domestic violence is well known, it is important

that people in the community who have experienced sexual violence also know there is support available.

- Let them know that, as a social service provider, their insights and perspectives will be a great resource as your agency develops a plan for how to reach out to survivors of sexual violence and strengthen the support services available to them.
- Describe the ways that your agency will use what you learn (e.g., to develop your plan for enhancing services, to strengthen outreach efforts, etc.).

## FOCUS GROUP LOGISTICS

Participation in a focus group may be facilitated by:

- Scheduling the group(s) during a time and in a place where the participants already meet (e.g., during a staff meeting or committee meeting).
- If there is not an existing meeting time that can be accessed, then scheduling the group during a time that is least likely to conflict with other job responsibilities (e.g., over lunch time or at the end of the work day).
- Providing time for informal networking before the group starts (e.g., refreshments, time and space for conversation while people gather).
- Meeting in a central location and/or holding multiple groups that are geographically convenient for participants.
- Keeping the groups to 60-90 minutes and making the time commitment clear when individuals are invited to participate.
- Keeping the groups small in size.

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## SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

What follows is a sample focus group guide that can be adapted for your assessment process. It is best practice to have at least one facilitator and a note taker for each focus group.

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Facilitator:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Note taker:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Time Started:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Time Ended:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Number of Participants from:

\_\_\_\_\_ Child Protective Service Community Mental Health

\_\_\_\_\_ Department of Human Services

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Gathering

- Make sure the entrance is clearly visible
- Have the entrance be hospitable and welcoming, perhaps having refreshments available and a comfortable place for people to mingle while they wait
- Participants should be warmly greeted by a staff person
- Help put people at ease, facilitate informal introductions, start casual conversation
- Have name tags prepared that use first names only and that are printed large enough that during the focus group people can read one another's name tags from across the circle
- When it's time, invite people to enter the room where the group will be meeting

### Room set-up

- Make sure the room where you are meeting is comfortable: well-lit, comfortable temperature, comfortable chairs
- Chairs should be arranged in a circle with everyone easily able to see one another
- The facilitator should have a space in the circle; the note taker should be unobtrusively sitting on the side
- Some people hold focus groups around a table, while others prefer to have only chairs; make your choice depending on what you think will make participants most comfortable



### **Focus group introduction**

- Greet participants, thank them for making time to be there
- Explain the purpose of the focus group: to help your agency enhance services for sexual assault survivors by giving us feedback we can use to develop a plan of action
- Introduce the facilitator and note taker
- Explain how the focus group will work
- Facilitator will ask questions to get conversation started
- What we want is to hear people's opinions and insights
- Feel free to ask questions of one another and respond to what others say

### **Explain ground rules**

- Listen respectfully to one another
- If you want to share an example from your work, do so in a way that maintains client confidentiality
- Ask that people respect one another's confidentiality so everyone can speak honestly and candidly, but remind them that you cannot guarantee what others will say after the group ends



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## Participant Introductions

- Ask people to introduce themselves with their name and agency
- Include an ice-breaker type of trivia question to put people at ease; for example, a piece of trivia about themselves, summer vacation plans, etc.

## FOCAL QUESTIONS

**1. Sexual violence is a complex issue.** There are different ways that people think about it. It will help us if we understand better how social service providers such as yourselves think about sexual violence. What does sexual violence look like among the people you serve?

If needed, ask for more detail:

- Who is victimized and who commits sexual violence?
- Why does it happen?
- How much of a problem is it in our communities?

### **2. How does sexual violence affect the clients you serve?**

If needed, ask for more detail:

- What kinds of sexual assault or abuse have they experienced?
- What do they need to cope with those experiences?
- How do the long-term effects of sexual violence complicate your work with them?

### **3. When your clients have told you about sexual assault, what do they seem to be looking for or why do you think they tell you?**

If needed, ask for more detail:

- What kind of tangible support are they looking for?
- What kind of emotional support are they looking for?
- Why do you think has helped them feel safe telling you about their experiences?





#### **4. How do you respond to their disclosures?**

If needed, ask for more detail:

- What do you tell them?
- How do you incorporate needs related to sexual violence into service plans?

#### **5. When and why would you refer them to our agency?**

If needed, ask for more detail:

- What do you hope we can do?
- How can our involvement help you with your case management?

#### **6. When and why would you not refer a client to our agency?**

#### **7. What do you think should be done to address people who sexually offend?**



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If needed, ask for more detail:

- How should the community respond to them?
- To what extent should they be held accountable?
- What forms might accountability take?

### **8. How can we work together to provide more comprehensive services to survivors of sexual assault?**

If needed, ask for more detail:

- What expertise can you bring to this work?
- How can we communicate better with one another?
- Are there changes needed to protocols or procedures?
- How can we give you easier access to our resources?
- Are there services your clients need that we are not currently providing?

## **TIPS FOR GATHERING MORE INFORMATION**

If you invite more detail, you are sending the message that you are interested in hearing more. There are varieties of ways you can get more details. Some examples of probing techniques are listed below.

### **Silent probes:**

- Don't be afraid of silence
- Use your body language to show interest

### **Uh-huh probes:**

- "I see ..."
- "Can you say more about that ..."
- "Yes, what do other people think?"

### **Probes for clarity:**

- "You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ and now you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. Can you explain more?"



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"You said \_\_\_\_\_ which is different from what I heard you say earlier when you talked about \_\_\_\_\_. What do you think makes those two situations different?"

"Earlier you were talking about \_\_\_\_\_. Can you tell me more about that?"

**Probes for meaning:**

- "Can you give me some examples of what you mean by \_\_\_\_\_?"
- "What would it look like to do \_\_\_\_\_?"
- "Why is \_\_\_\_\_ important?"

## WRAP UP

- Summarize the major themes that have been discussed
- Explain the next steps your agency will be taking to develop a plan of action and how that plan will be shared with community partners
- Offer contact information if participants have additional thoughts
- Distribute information about your agency's services
- Thank them for their time and participation



For information on how to analyze your focus group information, see *Listening to our Communities: Guide on Data Analysis* at [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org).







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