

# CSAT TA Package

## *Using Focus Groups to Understand Program Performance*

Programs like yours conduct evaluations on an ongoing basis. Analyzing your Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) data provides valuable information to inform you about your program's performance, your clients' successes, unmet client needs, and opportunities for program improvement.

However, there are additional ways to obtain data from your clients that can help you to better understand your clients, their experiences and needs, and ways in which your program can meet their needs.

You can conduct focus groups with your clients to obtain information that cannot be obtained through CSAT-GPRA data and to obtain information that supplements your CSAT-GPRA data analyses. For example, focus groups can help you to understand how your program is meeting its goals. Focus groups can help you to understand how your program impacts your clients as their needs change and as issues such as reimbursement change.

Programs may make changes in programming and service delivery, informed by CSAT-GPRA data. Conducting focus groups can obtain information from clients about these changes, such as their experiences, perceptions, customer satisfaction, and whether the changes meet their needs. Clients, staff, and other stakeholders have unique perspectives that can help you to evaluate both program strengths and areas that need improvement.

Results from focus group conversations can provide powerful information for administrators who can use the data to improve quality, identify staff training needs, and market the program. The narratives are especially helpful to share with funders to illustrate the program's impact on clients.

**About this Guide.** This Technical Assistance (TA) Package was developed by CSAT for substance abuse treatment program administrators who want to know how to use data from focus groups to supplement their CSAT-GPRA data. It provides practical guidance about using CSAT-GPRA data to identify areas of interest and to use focus group data to understand how your program can better meet its objectives.

**What is in this Guide?** This TA Package provides an overview of focus groups, how they can be useful for programs, and guidance about conducting them. The TA Package includes the following sections:

- What is a focus group?
- How focus groups can help quality improvement
- Using CSAT-GPRA data to identify focus group topics
- Organizing a focus group
- Conducting a focus group interview
- Sample script
- Understanding and reporting results
- Online resources



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## Using Focus Groups to Understand Program Performance

### What is a Focus Group?

A *focus group* is a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their opinions, perceptions, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes regarding a product, service, concept, or idea.

A focus group is a group interview conducted by a moderator, allowing participants to respond in a natural conversation pattern and to discuss issues with one another. It is an organized discussion with a purposively selected group of individuals.



### Focus Group Dynamics

A focus group is an efficient way to gather opinions from several people at once. Focus groups use individuals' reactions to others in the group as a way to foster discussion. Rather than asking each person to respond to a question in turn, participants are encouraged to talk to one another and share their thoughts and perspectives. By observing the interpersonal reactions, the moderator learns about group norms, opinions, beliefs, and shared knowledge, which can be helpful when developing new program initiatives.

The dynamic of a focus group allows a rich exploration of people's experiences. It can be used to examine what people think and how that influences their decisions, such as how clients use substance abuse treatment services.

The group discussion process can generate information and insights that are less likely to emerge outside of an interactive group process. Hearing other people talk about their feelings, thoughts, ideas, opinions, and experiences tends to stimulate various thoughts and feelings among other participants.

### Popularity in Healthcare Settings

Gathering information through focus groups is increasingly popular in healthcare settings. It can be used to explore why people behave certain ways or how they feel about specific aspects of their care. Stakeholders, such as clients, staff, community members, Boards of Directors, referral sources, and parents, can provide information that is not available from data reports.

### Considerations

Since focus groups foster self-disclosure, there may be other types of interviewing that are better for certain individuals. Sometimes participants may not be able to attend. There may be language barriers or concerns over confidentiality. In these cases, you can also gather information from individual interviews, and the interview can be tailored to accommodate special circumstances of the respondent. Individual interviews are especially appropriate when respondents may feel more comfortable talking one-to-one.

Although it is best to use an evaluator or a moderator who is not involved in the program, virtually any staff member can learn the skills to become an effective moderator of a focus group.

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### How Focus Groups Can Help Quality Improvement

Substance abuse treatment programs must demonstrate the effectiveness of their treatment services and continually improve program performance. As a result, providers are increasingly skillful at using program and client data to analyze and improve their program's performance. Focus groups can be an important tool in this process.

Focus groups can provide high-quality data that can help providers understand the underlying dynamics and beliefs that motivate clients, staff, and other stakeholders involved in their organization.



As a management tool, a focus group takes into consideration unique perspectives. It has the potential to anticipate conflicts within an organization when a change is likely and to create innovative solutions.

In relation to performance improvement, changes may occur on multiple levels. Also, changes are likely to affect more than one type of stakeholder. Thus, it can be helpful to elicit the opinions, thoughts, experiences, and perceptions from different types of stakeholders. Focus groups can be helpful to improve services in four broad ways:

**Explore**—Focus groups can help you to explore an issue from the stakeholders' perspectives. You can use focus groups to ask stakeholders what is important to them. For example, you can ask clients who are referred from drug courts what they need to increase treatment engagement. You can ask military families how your program can be more responsive to them.

**Investigate**—You can use focus groups to investigate why certain events or trends have occurred. For example, you can use focus groups to ask why intake numbers have decreased over the past 6 months or why clients are not following up with referrals to the recovery coach.

**Identify Successes**—Focus groups can help you to better understand successful aspects of your program and practices and examine why they are successful. For instance, you can ask program staff about the strategies that they find most successful to complete the 6-month follow-up interview. Similarly, you can use focus groups to ask parents why they attend and what they gain from weekly parent support groups.

**Understand Motivation**—You can use focus groups to understand the motivation of stakeholders. For instance, you wish to improve some aspect of your program, but to do so, you will need buy-in from others. A focus group can help you to understand what would motivate your Board of Directors to fund additional recovery support services. Similarly, a focus group can help you to explore how to best implement the Network for the Improvement of Addiction Treatment (NIATx) measures to help reduce no-show rates.

#### Advantages of Using a Focus Group

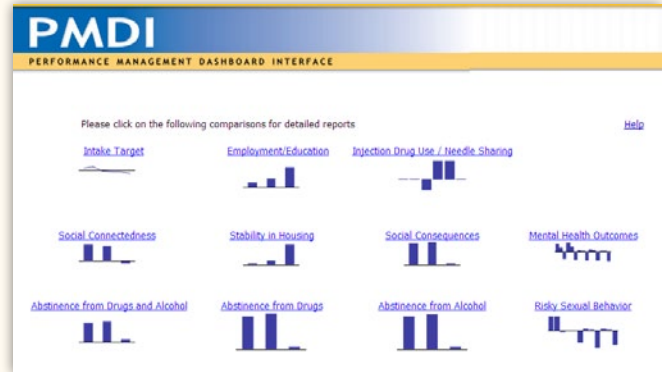
- Engages participants in a forum where they become agents for change
- Encourages participation from people who may be intimidated by an individual interview
- Includes people who cannot read or write
- Allows for a discussion among group participants
- Gathers different perspectives on an issue

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### Using CSAT-GPRA Data to Identify Focus Group Topics

When developing focus group questions, a good first step is to examine your CSAT-GPRA data. Both the CSAT-GPRA reports and the Performance Management Dashboard Interface (PMDI) are rich resources of client and program data. Your program may also collect other information, such as the source of client referral or family composition, that can be used along with information from CSAT-GPRA reports. The following can help to illustrate ways in which programs can examine data to develop focus group questions.



To get started, go to the CSAT-GPRA website and use the PMDI to examine your data. You may notice that overall, your clients did not experience improvement in the employment/education outcome during the past 6 months. To learn more, you click the mini-graph for Employment/Education to view the bar graph and table. Next, you select the Sub-Population option. This window shows a bar chart and a table describing employment in relation to ethnic and other subpopulations. (Mini-graphs above are illustrative only.)

At this window, you may see that some groups have shown improvement and others have not. For instance, you notice that homeless clients and Hispanic/Latino clients improved while those with co-occurring disorders did not improve. Using the PMDI, you can also see how your program compares to others in your state. This helps you to understand whether the employment/education patterns are specific to your program.

You can generate a *Crosstabulation Report* examining employment among your Hispanic/Latino clients to understand this trend better. Using this report, you can identify the percentages of Hispanic/Latino clients in each age group by employment status at 6 months. As the crosstabulation table below illustrates, Hispanic/Latinos age 25–34 years are the most employed age group, and Hispanic/Latinos age 18–24 years are the largest age group that is unemployed and looking for work. These data suggest that focus groups with employed clients and with unemployed clients might help you to identify gaps and strengths in your employment initiatives. You can ask what clients found helpful in case management services and how you can improve coordination with vocational services in the community.

Question: D - 3. Are you currently employed?

Employment	10-12	13-17	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	MISSING DATA
Employed full time	0 0.0%	77 1.2%	1,168 12.8%	1,866 14.8%	1,130 12.1%	564 8.9%	112 6.1%	8 2.8%	10 16.7%
Employed part time	3 0.9%	370 5.7%	1,080 11.8%	1,285 10.2%	824 8.8%	473 7.4%	144 7.9%	7 2.5%	4 6.7%
Unemployed, looking for	18 5.2%	2,301 35.5%	3,989 43.7%	5,175 41.1%	3,689 39.4%	2,107 33.1%	455 24.8%	36 12.8%	17 28.3%
Unemployed, disabled	0 0.0%	10 0.2%	174 1.9%	731 5.8%	1,199 12.8%	1,557 24.5%	577 31.5%	79 28.1%	6 10.0%
Unemployed, volunteer work	1 0.3%	20 0.3%	33 0.4%	62 0.5%	45 0.5%	59 0.9%	8 0.4%	3 1.1%	1 1.7%
Unemployed, retired	2 0.6%	15 0.2%	3 0.0%	4 0.0%	7 0.1%	28 0.4%	65 3.5%	78 27.8%	1 1.7%
Unemployed, not looking for	308 89.5%	3,436 52.9%	1,424 15.6%	2,136 17.0%	1,701 18.2%	1,035 16.3%	271 14.8%	30 10.7%	14 23.3%

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### Organizing a Focus Group

Conducting a focus group requires careful step-by-step planning. Work with other staff to develop a clear definition of the problem, identify information you want to elicit, and create the appropriate questions. The optimal size is 8 to 10 participants. Identify the most appropriate participants for your purpose, such as women, veterans, or program completers. Allow 1.5 hours for the discussion and an additional 10 minutes before and after to set up and end the group. Consider the following.

#### Identify a Moderator

The focus group moderator should be able to put people at ease and encourage a robust conversation through active listening. He or she will be required to tease out a diverse range of opinions, while making people feel comfortable expressing their opinions. Groups can be dominated by one or two vocal participants. The moderator should ensure that each participant has a chance to speak and may need to ask participants questions to encourage their involvement. Moderators should not express their own opinions during the interview. If the moderator is not familiar with the topic, he or she must be briefed about the purpose and any relevant background information. The moderator should not be in a position of power, either as a direct supervisor of a participant or a current or past clinician of any participant.



#### Develop Recruiting Strategy

Focus group members should share at least one characteristic in common related to the topic of the focus group, such as "new to the Board of Directors" or "recently hired staff" or "clients with veterans in their families." This forms the basis of a shared experience and helps promote dialogue. When recruiting participants, explain the characteristic you are seeking. Generally, people are more willing to participate if they know why they were asked. However, if group members are too similar, diverse opinions and experiences may not be elicited. Participants need to feel comfortable with each other.

#### Identify Time and Place

Offer participants time options and tell them that you will confirm the time. The location should be easily accessible and comfortable. Ask participants to arrive 10 minutes before you want to start the group. This allows the participants time to settle and informally talk to one another.

#### Invite Participants at Least 2 Weeks in Advance

A phone call is usually best, and it adds a personal tone from the beginning. The call provides an opportunity for participants to ask questions before they make their decision to attend.

#### Consider Incentives

Incentives are helpful but not mandatory. However, food and beverages help break the ice among participants who may not know each other.

#### Consider Audio Recording and Note Taking

Consider audio recording the session and using a note taker to enhance accuracy. This should be clearly stated in the Consent Form.

#### Consider Name Tags

When participants do not know each other, consider using name tags (first names only) for participants, moderator, and note taker. It can help participants speak with one another.

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### Conducting a Focus Group Interview

Greater focus group planning will promote more efficient and effective focus group sessions. Practice sessions with the moderator and staff can increase the moderator's content knowledge and enhance the moderator's interview skills.

#### Organization

The structure of a focus group follows seven main components, which should be included in an interview guide.

The interview guide, or protocol, is a script that the moderator uses to facilitate the focus group; it includes all of the items that the moderator needs to address, including questions and probes. The interview guide helps to organize and structure the focus group discussion and ensure that all of the key questions are asked during the discussion. The interview guide includes the following:

- Introduction
- Purpose of the focus group
- Confidentiality Statement (sometimes separate, sometimes included in the Consent Form)
- Consent Form (check if your program requires approval from Institutional Review Board)
- Ground rules
- Questions and probes
- Summary, wrap-up, and thank you

#### The Confidentiality Statement

The Confidentiality Statement explains that the moderator will not attribute any responses given by the group to specific individuals. Rather, the moderator will document information from the group in summaries and unattributed quotes. The Confidentiality Statement states that participants agree not to reveal any information discussed to anyone outside the group. The statement notes that the information will be summarized for a report to agency staff and that participant names or identification will not be used. The statement notes that audio recording is for accuracy only and will not be shared with anyone outside the group. Similarly, neither notes nor written transcriptions will include any identifying information about the participants.

#### Preparation

Have all forms ready for signing and provide ink pens for each participant. Chairs should be comfortable and arranged in a circle or around a table. Ensure that participants have sufficient room.

If you do not use a note taker, you should record notes in case there are problems with the audio recording. If you use a note taker, consider taking your own notes to help you remember ideas, actions, and interactions among the participants.

Make a map of where people are sitting to refresh your memory later. Make a note of nonverbal communication between participants. After the focus group has ended, type your notes as quickly as possible while the information is still fresh in your mind.



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### Sample Script

The following is a sample script to illustrate the seven steps of a focus group. In this scenario, Sandy Spring Treatment Program management wants to obtain information from clients about improving employment outcomes. John, the program evaluator, will moderate a focus group of clients.

#### 1. Make Introductions

The moderator introduces himself, states his program affiliation, and introduces the note taker and her agency affiliation.

*Good morning! Thank you for participating in this focus group. My name is John, and I am the program evaluator at the Sandy Spring Treatment Program. I will serve as the moderator for today's session, and I look forward to our discussion. I would like to introduce Karen. She is a research assistant at Sandy Spring and will take notes of the discussion.*



#### 2. Describe Group Goals

Explain why you are conducting this focus group. Describe why the participants were selected, which topics will be discussed, and how the information will be used. Ask each participant to state his or her first name. Consider using an icebreaker to diminish nervousness about speaking. Doing so may help some people to feel more comfortable speaking in the group and express their opinions more easily and quickly.

*The purpose of this focus group is to help us better understand your experiences as a client, especially in relation to your employment needs and our employment-related services. We asked you to participate because you have received assistance from our program, and we would like to know more about your experiences. The information you share today will help us improve our services. To get to know each other better, please share your first name and, just for fun, answer this question: If you were a musical instrument, what instrument would you be and why?*

#### 3. Explain Confidentiality Issues

Ensure that all participants have signed the Confidentiality Statement and make certain that all participants agree to the terms of this statement.

*Has everyone signed the Confidentiality Statement? As a reminder, the Confidentiality Statement says that you agree not to reveal to anyone outside the group either the identity of others in this group or what they said. We will take notes of this session and develop reports. The reports will summarize what was discussed in the focus group but will not include the names of participants. The audio recording will be used to help me develop reports about the session and to ensure that our notes are accurate. I will not share the audio recording with anyone else. Do you have any questions?*

#### 4. Review Consent Form

The Consent Form should explain that focus group participation will not affect the care that they or their family members receive at the agency, they can refuse to answer any question, and participation is voluntary. If the group includes staff or external stakeholders, the Consent Form should state that their relationship with the agency will not be affected by their participation. Before they sign the forms, ask if there are any questions or concerns.

*By signing the Consent Form, you agree that you are here voluntarily and can refuse to answer any question. We appreciate you taking the time to be here today and assure you that your participation will not affect the care you receive. Are there any questions?*

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### 5. Review Ground Rules

Implement and explain simple focus group ground rules, which are common courtesies that will help the group run smoothly. Common ground rules include (1) only one person speaks at a time, (2) respect each other's ideas, (3) there are no wrong opinions, and (4) every opinion is important.

*I would like to review some basic rules for today's discussion so that everyone has an opportunity to express their opinions. Try not to interrupt anyone who is speaking. You can agree or disagree with what others say but don't make any personal attacks. In this discussion, there are no wrong answers, only honest answers. Would anyone like to add other ground rules? Any questions?*

### 6. Ask Questions and Probes

The moderator should have between 10 and 12 primary questions to ask. Consider bolding these questions on your interview guide. Unlike questionnaires, the focus group moderator does not have to stick to the script. A moderator can follow the flow of the discussion and ask follow-up questions. Consider asking "big picture" questions early on to obtain participants' overall perspectives and thoughts about the topic being discussed. Use follow-up probes to encourage discussion and obtain greater detail. You can use follow-up probes such as: "Please tell me more about that." "Can you explain that in more detail?" and "Can you give me an example?" To elicit a different point of view, use a probe such as: "Are there other ways to look at this?" To elicit information about participants' past experiences, encourage participants to think back and describe their experiences and feelings. Avoid questions that might make participants feel defensive.

You can begin with a "big picture" question: *Describe what it is like for you to find a job in this city.*

Then ask questions and probes that are designed to elicit more specific details: *Did the Sandy Spring program provide any employment-related services? What type of service did you receive? In what ways was the service helpful? In what ways was the service not helpful? Did the service meet your needs? If not, what needs were not met? What services would you find helpful?*

Now think about a situation when you wanted to apply for a job but were concerned about how to discuss your past employment history. *What could have helped you talk about it? What did staff here or anyone else do that was helpful in getting a job? What was not helpful?*

When starting a new question, you can sometimes insert your own experiences: *I found that one of the hardest things to do when looking for a job is staying hopeful. What is the hardest thing for you? How do you deal with that? Is there some way that Sandy Spring can help?*

It can be valuable to ask if other people have a different point of view. This can help to ensure that everyone participates in the discussion. It is typical for discussions to veer into other topic areas. It is the moderator's job to pull the discussion back to the topic without offending anyone: *Housing needs are very important. For the moment, however, let's continue exploring your employment needs and experiences. We want to make certain that we get everyone's thoughts and perspectives about that.*

### 7. Summarize, Wrap up, and Provide Thanks

Keep track of the time, inform participants 10 minutes prior to the end of the discussion, wrap up the focus group, summarize the proceedings, and thank participants.

*We have discussed how difficult it is to reenter the workforce, both because of the tight job market and because some people are nervous that they may fail. You said that appointment times here are not sufficiently flexible and that our clinicians don't understand how scared you are of a relapse if there is too much work stress. Have I left anything out? We have 10 minutes left, and I would like to hear about ways you think Sandy Spring could do a better job in helping with employment.*

*Thank you for participating in this focus group and for sharing your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The Sandy Spring program appreciates your feedback. Feel free to contact me if you would like to share any additional information.*



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### Focus Group Checklist

- **Two pens or pencils and a notepad for taking notes**
- **Recording equipment: audio recorder, extension cord, extra batteries**
- **Consent Forms and Confidentiality Statements**
- **Pens for participants to sign forms**
- **Interview guide**
- **Food and beverages (optional)**

### Understanding and Reporting Results

Focus groups can generate a large amount of data. A single focus group may produce 30 or more pages of transcription. Thus, a key data analysis task is to organize the text and understand the central themes. Review the data soon after the focus group, while the information is fresh in your memory. There will be two forms of data: the audio recording (or a transcription or summary of the discussion) and written notes.

Getting input from others can help the analysis and interpretation. The moderator often does the analysis and may benefit from the perspectives of others at the program, such as the evaluator, especially when a participant was unclear. You can involve others in the entire analysis or in any of the steps. For example, you may want someone to analyze the text to identify broad themes, or you may want help interpreting unexpected results. The analysis involves four stages: transcribing or summarizing the data, coding the data, interpreting the data, and writing the report. If you conduct individual, rather than focus group, interviews, you can analyze the information using the same procedures.



There is variation in the way that focus group data are analyzed and reported. You can simply summarize the themes you identify to inform changes to your program. In this approach, you would include each question and list the participant responses or summaries. Alternatively, you can perform a more detailed analysis, which is described below. This detailed analysis is especially useful for interpreting data from multiple groups.

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#### 1. Transcribe or Summarize the Data

In this stage, the task is to put the data into a format you can analyze. You can do this yourself or use transcription services that will transcribe or summarize the data from your audio recordings. In a literal translation, all the “umms” and “ahhs” and incomplete sentences are transcribed. Alternatively, you can choose to transcribe only complete sentences, but it is important to maintain the character of respondents' comments. You can also prepare detailed notes from the recording and include selected quotes.

Reread your notes and the transcript a few times to identify important themes. Often, because the moderator was leading the discussion and focusing on the process, he will hear themes in a new way when reviewing the data. It can be helpful to write notes as you read the transcript. For example, if you read that a participant was frustrated because his cell phone had poor reception at the halfway house, you might make a note to examine whether others also had phone problems while looking for work.

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### 2. Code the Data

For this stage, the task is to assign text to central ideas or themes. Coding involves organizing phrases and sentences into categories of themes. It reduces large amounts of data to manageable units. Coding helps you discover patterns in participants' responses. You can code using word processing or spreadsheet programs, such as Word or Excel. Make certain that you maintain a master copy of the file so that you can return to the original text if needed.

You can create categories before coding or develop them as you read through the responses. You might find it helpful to create theme categories in advance and add new ones as you read through the responses. As you read responses and discussions, consider the broad subject that participants were discussing and what they were saying about it.

How many codes or themes should you define? Each focus group is different, and there is no set number of codes to use. It is better to have too many than too few. In later stages, you may have opportunities to combine some codes if necessary.

Examples of codes or themes for the employment-related focus group might include networking, previous experience, training opportunities, barriers to finding a job, need for identification, and transportation. With these codes in mind, you can paste the quote in the Text cell of a table, assign a relevant code to the quote, and develop a summary of the remarks as shown below in Table 1. The summary becomes the data that describes what the participants said about the code.

<b>Table 1: Sample Text, Codes, and Summaries</b>		
<b>Question 1: What is your experience looking for work?</b>		
<b>Text</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Summary</b>
I was just speaking with people at AA, asking how they were doing finding a job. Asking for tips.	Job seeking	I can network at AA meetings
When you're in recovery, you don't want to be a burden on people and I'm unemployed.	Unemployment	Feels like he's a burden Not feeling wanted
It's impossible. About a year ago I had a lot of medical things happen and couldn't go anywhere.	Barriers	Medical problems are a barrier
I have a lot of time on my hands, and it's not good. I am trying to stay sober.	Unemployment	Too much time is a relapse threat
There are good jobs and there are dangerous jobs, and I've had both.	Being employed	Some jobs are "dangerous" if not supportive of recovery; some jobs support recovery
<b>Question 4: What did staff here or anyone else do that was helpful in getting a job?</b>		
My case worker told me about a website for Veterans.	Resources	Special website for Veterans Staff were helpful
I had to miss my appointments to look for a job.	Job searching	Had to make priorities, conflict between employment and other recovery efforts
When you live in a shelter, you can get more help, welfare, food stamps—things I couldn't get elsewhere.	Entitlements	Benefits of shelters
It's hard when you can't afford identification, and the therapist didn't know how to get one for me.	Identification	Need ID and therapist wasn't helpful

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### 3. Interpret the Data

The next task is to attach meaning and significance to the analysis. Review the codes to determine if some can be combined or removed. "Job seeking" and "Job searching" can be combined, and "Entitlements" can be removed since it doesn't address employment. Comments can relate to and be grouped with more than one code. If you organize by question, you can see responses from each participant in one document. If you organize by category, you can see themes across questions in one document.

If you are uncertain about interpreting a comment, ask participants to clarify. Consider this example: "Mary, you said something about finding work, and I want to make sure I understand it correctly. When you said you spoke with people at AA meetings about how they were finding jobs, did you find their suggestions helpful or unhelpful?"

Place responses for the same category in the same "Comments" cell related to the category. Combine codes into themes. You can develop a summary table (Table 2) to pull together all four analytic tasks. For each theme, record participant comments and record your analysis as assessment and/or recommendations.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Assessment/Recommendations</b>
Frustration in the system (Identification, job seeking, barriers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Need ID and therapist wasn't helpful.</li><li>• Lose hope when language is a barrier.</li><li>• Cannot afford transportation.</li><li>• Agency had no information to give me (4 participants).</li><li>• Had to assign priorities.</li><li>• Conflict between employment and other recovery efforts.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clients face many barriers to employment. Agency should standardize information on employment resources.</li><li>• Many clients lose hope before they begin job searching.</li><li>• Agency can train case managers on obtaining IDs.</li></ul>
Impact on sobriety (Being unemployed, Being employed)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Employed participants feared they may lose job and sobriety.</li><li>• Some jobs are "dangerous" if they lead to relapse; some jobs are more supportive.</li><li>• Unemployed filled time going to more AA meetings (4 participants) and church (3 participants).</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Agency should assess staff willingness to hold family groups.</li><li>• Clergy who went "behind the wall" were successful in helping prisoners line up AA sponsors. Agency should forge better linkages with faith groups.</li></ul>
Impact on self-concept (Being unemployed, job seeking)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feels like he's a burden.</li><li>• Not feeling wanted.</li><li>• I can network at AA meetings.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-esteem is an issue when not employed.</li><li>• Set aside time in staff meetings to discuss clients' self-esteem and ways clients can feel more empowered.</li></ul>

Consider the following when analyzing qualitative data:

- What common themes emerge in responses about specific topics? How do these patterns (or lack thereof) help to illuminate the broader central question(s)?
- Are there deviations from these patterns? If so, are there any factors that might explain these deviations?
- How are participants' environments or past experiences related to their behaviors and attitudes?
- What interesting stories emerge from the responses? How do they help illuminate the central question(s)?
- Do any of these patterns suggest that additional data may be needed?
- Are the patterns that emerge similar to what you expected? If not, what might explain these discrepancies?

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The Wallace Foundation points out that one of the greatest challenges in qualitative research is knowing how much attention to place on various comments. They suggest the following guidelines:

- How often did the comment come up? Comments that come up frequently become major findings.
- Be aware that even if a comment was expressed once, it may be an excellent idea.
- How many people hold this perception? If a perception is held by many, most, or all of the participants in a focus group, that's a good sign that it's a major finding.
- How strongly do people feel about this perception? Are participants passionate about a particular point of view, or are they neutral and blasé?

### 4. Write the Report

Once the information has been gathered and analyzed, the next step is to develop a report. A focus group summary report should include the following sections:

**Introduction**—Provide an overview of the project and a general understanding of the problem or question to be explored. Describe the goals, objectives, and research questions of the focus group.

**Participant Recruitment**—Describe who the participants were, why they were selected, and how they were recruited for the focus group. Describe the use of incentives if used.

**Focus Group Procedures**—Describe the number of groups convened, the dates and locations, the number of focus group participants, the length of each focus group, and the mode of the focus groups (e.g., in person, video conference, online). Describe the participation of staff members and their roles. Describe the process of data transcription, organization, and analysis.

**Results**—Provide a summary of the findings and recommendations. If you developed a Focus Group Summary Table, use it to describe the themes, comments, and assessment/recommendations. Otherwise, provide a summary of this information. Include both consensus and minority opinions. Consider including participant quotations that succinctly describe key issues for the themes. Focus on the range of participant feedback and themes, rather than quantifying each specific point.

**Appendices**—Consider including a copy of the Interview Guide, Confidentiality Statement, Consent Form, Ground Rules, Questions and Probes, and transcripts.

Working with qualitative data, either through focus groups or individual interviews, is a rewarding experience and helps you see your program through the eyes of others. The information you receive will reflect the bias of the participants on that given day, but the experiences and opinions are important data that have value to your organization. Analyzing the data is part science and part art. Your task is to uncover the reasons why a particular project may have failed or why a project is likely to succeed. It is important to think about what could explain your results, even if the results are expected. You can add the CSAT-GPRA data to help guide your thinking about explanations and about possible solutions.



# CSAT TA Package

## Using Focus Groups to Understand Program Performance

### Using Focus Groups to Understand Program Performance: Summary

A focus group is a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their opinions, perceptions, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes regarding a product, service, concept, or idea. They can help improve services by exploring issues from stakeholders' perspectives, investigating why certain events have occurred, exploring successful practices, and understanding stakeholders' motivations.

To begin, develop a definition of the problem, identify information you want, and develop questions. Assemble a focus group of 8 to 10 participants. Identify appropriate participants for your purpose. Allow 1.5 hours for the discussion and an additional 10 minutes before and after to set up and end the group.

When recruiting participants, explain the characteristic you are seeking. Consider audio recording the session and using a note taker to enhance accuracy. Use an interview guide that includes all items that the moderator needs to address. Using the interview guide, make introductions, describe the group's goals, explain confidentiality issues, review the Consent Form, explain ground rules, and begin the questions and probes. When done, summarize, wrap up, and thank participants.

After the focus group, begin the analysis, which involves four stages: transcribing or summarizing the data, coding the data, interpreting the data, and writing the report. Transcription is a first stage to identify key themes. It can be helpful to reread and make notes. Coding involves organizing phrases and sentences into categories of themes. Review codes to determine if some can be combined or removed. Place responses for the same category within the same Comments cell that relates to the category. Combine codes into themes. Use a Focus Group Summary Table. Finally, develop a report that includes the following sections: Introduction, Participant Recruitment, Focus Group Procedures, Results, and Appendices.

You can conduct focus groups to obtain information that cannot be obtained through CSAT-GPRA data and to obtain information that supplements your CSAT-GPRA data analyses. Focus groups can help you to understand how your program is meeting its goals. Focus groups can help you to understand how your program impacts your clients as their needs change and as issues such as reimbursement change.

#### Online Resources

##### **Assessing Community Needs and Resources**

The Community Tool Box  
More: <http://bit.ly/15fshGZ>

##### **Basics of Conducting Focus Groups**

Free Management Library  
More: <http://bit.ly/pR0m6k>

##### **Toolkit for Conducting Focus Groups**

OMNI Institute  
More: <http://bit.ly/17EO22u>

##### **Workbook D: Conducting Focus Groups**

Wallace Foundation  
More: <http://bit.ly/17GmBpe>

##### **Evaluate Programs Tutorial**

Instructional Assessment Resources  
More: <http://bit.ly/XGujh4>

##### **Evaluating Your Program**

Evidence-Based Practices KIT  
Center for Mental Health Services  
More: <http://1.usa.gov/10c5Bqn>

##### **Informed Consent FAQs**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
More: <http://1.usa.gov/rt5Hbl>

##### **Developing and Implementing Continuous Quality Improvement for Treatment Programs**

Center for Substance Abuse Treatment  
More: <http://1.usa.gov/11osVhg>