



**The Urban Institute**  
**Enhancing Food Stamp Certification: Food Stamp Modernization Efforts**  
**Focus Group Guidelines**

**GUIDE 1 – FSP PARTICIPANTS**

*Thank you for helping us to arrange a focus group during our visit to [Insert City]. Here are some guidelines to help you recruit participants:*

*Purpose of the group:*

The purpose of this focus group is to help us gain more insight into user perspectives about access to and customer service experiences with the Food Stamp Program (FSP), addressing specific procedures such as application, certification and recertification.

*Number of participants:*

Ideally, we would like to have between **7-12** focus group participants. In general, recruiting approximately 16-20 people will result in 7-12 actual participants, when taking into account the standard number of no-shows. However, this number may be adjusted to reflect your experience with recruitment in the past or your relationship with the participants.

We would like to make sure that the focus group participants get a reminder call about the focus group at least two days in advance. Do you have a preference as to whether we call them or your staff calls them? If you give us a list of those who have agreed to participate and their phone numbers, we would be happy to call.

*Who can participate:*

Focus group participants should be any individuals who are newly approved or recertified FSP participants. This means people who have submitted an application, been certified for eligibility and are currently receiving food stamps.

*Other focus group logistics:*

- The focus group can take place in the evening or any time that is convenient for the participants. We want to accommodate work and school schedules. In your experience,

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, no persons are required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 0584-XXXX and expires on XX/XX/XXXX. The time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average 1.34 hours, including the time to review instructions, search existing data resources, gather the data needed, and complete and review the information collection. If you have any comments concerning the accuracy of the time estimate or suggestions for improving this form, please write to: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, ORNA, Alexandria, VA 22302.



- are there particular times that are easier for participants to attend meetings? Do you have any specific times in mind at this point?
- Depending on the time of the focus group, we plan to offer participants refreshments or a light meal and would like to request your assistance in arranging this.
- We will need your assistance in locating a space to hold the focus group. We need a space that will have minimal distraction, preferably a room with a large table or tables and a door that can be closed. We will need the room for about 2 hours 45 minutes total, which will include time to set up the room before the meeting and to clean up afterwards.
- It is important that there should not be children present in the same room as the focus group. Will child care during the focus group be an issue?
- We ask that no observers be present in order to encourage a frank discussion among participants.
- If necessary, we may need your help in identifying someone who can translate for us during the sessions. We will pay for translation assistance if required.

*Please note:*

These sessions are completely confidential. Participants may refuse to answer any question they wish. Participation will not affect benefit receipt in any way.

Focus group participants will receive a \$20 incentive fee for participating in the session.

**Thank you for your help! If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to call [Insert Name, Phone].**



## Focus Group Discussion Guide

### GUIDE 1 – FSP PARTICIPANTS

*(Note: This is a guide, not a script. Moderators may vary topics and probes to accommodate particular sites and groups)*

**Facilitator Note: Be sure to reference the programs using the same name they are known by in your particular site.**

#### Introduction

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this focus group. Your participation is very important to this study. I'm \_\_\_\_\_ and this is \_\_\_\_\_. We work for the Urban Institute, an organization located in Washington, D.C., that studies government programs and makes recommendations to improve them.

The purpose of our study is to learn about experiences that people like you have when you apply for food stamps. Specifically, we are concerned with your experiences when you first apply and also in terms of what you're required to do in order to continue receiving food stamps. We are holding similar meetings in a number of different cities across the country, including \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_. *[List a few to give a better idea]* Our purpose is to learn more about the process of applying for and continuing to receive food stamps from the participant's perspective, particularly in light of some recent changes that have been made to the process in your state.

Focus groups may be new to many and perhaps all of you—so let me make a few general points about what to expect. As the facilitator, I just ask the questions and moderate the discussion. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will ask. What's really important is for all of you to speak up and tell us your thoughts and feelings because we are interested in learning each of your opinions. We hope to have a lively and informative discussion.

This will be an informal discussion. We will talk for about 1 to 1½ hours. There will be no formal breaks. Please feel free to get up at any time to stretch, go to the bathroom, or get something to drink. At the end of the session there will be a short information form to complete. You don't need to put your name on the form. All information is private.

It is important that only one person at a time speak so that we can all follow what each of you say.

There may be times during the discussion when I need to interrupt--either to ask you to explain what you have just said more clearly, or to move on to the next question to keep us on time. Again, this happens just to make sure that everyone has a chance to answer each of the questions, and that we listen to what each person says. In the past, most people have told us they enjoy these focus groups very much because it gives them a chance to share their experiences and hear about others' experiences.



We value the information you share with us today and want to make sure we capture all of it. So we will be taping the sessions and taking notes. Does anyone have any objection to taping this group? We do this because otherwise we will not be able to remember all that was said today. I want to reassure you that we do these things only so that we can accurately remember what we learn here today. We will not include your names in anything we write for this or talk about, and we will be careful that your names are in no way associated with anything that is said here today. What you say will be kept private. We also ask that you respect the privacy of others in the group and not repeat anything you hear in this discussion outside the group. We will ask you to sign for you \$20 in order to account for our financial disbursements, but we pass on only a coded identifier, not your name, to our accounting department. We will also ask you to fill out a brief information form at the end of the meeting but, again, no names will be collected. This information is being collected only for research purposes.

Your participation here is voluntary and you may refuse to answer any question if you wish. We want to stress that your participation is not required in order to continue receiving benefits or to receive them at any point in the future.

Once again, we are very pleased to have you here today; we certainly appreciate your input. Are there any questions before we get started?

### **Focus Group Questions**

Please introduce yourselves by telling us your first name, the number of people living in your household, and how many children you have living at home with you. (*Ask each participant to write his/her name on tent card.*)

1. Let's start by sharing a little background information. How many of you are currently receiving food stamps? (*Ask for show of hands and state the number for the tape recorder.*) About how long have you been receiving them? Was this the first time you applied for food stamps? Did any of you apply for and receive food stamps before but then stopped for some reason and later applied and starting receiving them again? If yes, when and for how long?
2. Now let's talk a little about what you knew about the FSP before you applied. First, tell me how (and from whom) you heard about the FSP and why you decided to apply. (*Probe: TANF caseworker, other service provider, neighbor/friend/family member.*)
3. Did friends, family members, or anyone from a community group tell you anything beforehand that helped you? If so, what was it? (*Probe: Written information, agency outreach efforts.*)
4. Did any of you use an on-line prescreening tool to see if you might be eligible for FS? Did any of you meet with someone from another agency for prescreening to see if you might be eligible?
5. What, if anything, had you heard about the FS application process? Did this have any impact on your decision to apply? If yes, in what way?



6. We're interested in learning about the entire application process – how the FS “system” works. Where do you start if you want to apply for FS? Where do you go from there? How do you get from Point A to Point B – what did you have to do? Where/how many places did you have to go?

*Probes:*

- *How many different workers did you meet with?*
  - *Where/how many places/offices did you have to go? Were you able to conduct any business by phone or were all meetings conducted in person?*
  - *What documentation and paperwork were you required to produce?*
  - *What if any parts of the process were completed electronically/on-line?*
  - *Did you receive help from anyone not at the FS agency (e.g., someone from a Food Bank or church)?*
7. What parts of the application process were confusing? What parts were particularly difficult/time-consuming to complete?
  8. What problems did you encounter? (*Probe for access issues: inconvenient office hours; excessive waiting times; embarrassing situations (e.g., filling out paperwork in stores, etc.); transportation; child care issues; extensive or confusing paperwork*) Did any FS workers or other service providers do anything to help you overcome these problems?
  9. (*If new technology was implemented in this site and tailor questions to the site*). Did you use any of the new technology available for pre-screening and/or filing an application on-line? Did you feel comfortable using it? Where did you use it (*probe: at home, at work, at a community agency, etc.*) Do you have access to the internet in your home? At some other location? Did anyone help you in using the new technology?
  10. Overall, was the experience as you expected? If no, what was different than you thought it would be?
  11. What parts of the process work well? What doesn't? What parts of the process were the most difficult or frustrating? What changes would you suggest to improve the system of services?
  12. For those of you with previous experience with the FSP application/recertification process, is there anything that is different now than it was before? (*Probe: Will be tailored to modernization efforts in site but may include: fewer required in-person meetings/more telephone meetings; more convenient/flexible office hours; shorter wait times; ability to fill out applications in other locations and/or by mail or fax; ability to be pre-screened/apply on-line; less paperwork*)



13. Did you ever apply for benefits but were denied? Why? Did you ever apply for benefits but did not complete the process? Why?
14. Let's summarize the key points we've heard today..... Does anyone have any final thoughts, comments or recommendations?

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***Thank you very much for your participation today. The information that you shared with us will help us better understand the food stamp application and certification process from the perspective of participants. Before you leave, we would like you to sign this form, acknowledging that you have received an incentive payment from us and that your participation in this focus group has been voluntary.***