

Appendix 3

Focus Group Participant Communications

DRAFT LETTER

Focus Group Advance Letter

Dear _____ [insert name of recipient]:

The law firm of Jackson Lewis LLP has been engaged to conduct an **independent** assessment of the effectiveness of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) programs in reaching diverse populations in a non-discriminatory manner. As part of this independent assessment, Jackson Lewis will be conducting a series of focus groups in 10 states. The focus groups will help Jackson Lewis obtain customer views, opinions, and experiences related to how effectively USDA is equitably and fairly providing technical and financial assistance to women, minorities, and socially disadvantaged customers and potential customers of the Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Rural Development and Risk Management Agency throughout rural America.

You have been selected to participate in a focus group discussion because you are a USDA customer or potential customer who has applied for or received technical or financial assistance within the past three years. The focus group discussions will explore issues related to your recent experience with USDA. Examples of topics covered during the focus groups include, for example, the following:

- Your knowledge of the programs for which you may have been eligible;
- The decision process in applying for a particular program, including the time you had to wait for a decision;
- Your opinion of the fairness of USDA business processes, including the timeliness of the review process; and,
- Any barriers or positive aspects of the application process, including accessibility, equity, fairness, and accountability.

The focus group discussion will take about 2 hours and you will be paid \$50 for taking the time to participate in the focus group discussion.

Your opinion is valued and can assist us in making recommendations to USDA. While participation in the focus group discussion is voluntary and you can decline to answer any question asked during the focus group discussion, we hope you will participate because your responses are critical to provide a complete picture of USDA's programs. Information you give us during the focus group discussion will be confidential, and will not be disclosed without your permission to anyone other than those working on the project, except as otherwise required by law. No USDA official or employee will be present at the focus group. The information collected during the focus group discussions will be aggregated for analysis and reporting. No individual identifying information will be reported.

You are free to decide if you want to be part of the study. If you choose not to take part, your choice will not affect in any way the type or the quality of services you may receive in the future from USDA. If you have any questions about the study, _____ can be reached by telephone at _____ or by email at _____@.com.

Our subcontractor, Westat, will contact you soon to see if you are able to attend the focus group on (____) at (____). Westat will also ask you if you are represented by counsel in a lawsuit against the USDA or one of its agencies. This is so we will not ask you to do anything without your counsel's consent. Meanwhile, if you have questions, please call _____ at _____.

Thank you for considering participating in this important study.

Sincerely,

Please see attached Public Burden Statement

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not 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 0503-xxxx. The time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average 120 minutes or two hours per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information.

PHONE SCRIPT FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Hello, may I speak with **[insert customer name]**?

[When customer is confirmed:] My name is _____. I'm calling from Westat, a research company working on an independent assessment being conducted by the law firm of Jackson Lewis LLP relating to the effectiveness of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) programs in reaching diverse populations in a non-discriminatory manner. You should have recently received a letter about a focus group discussion that we would like you to participate in. It will be about how fairly the USDA provides technical and financial assistance to its customers.

Did you receive a letter in the mail with details about the focus group?

A. ___ Yes.

→ Would you be interested in participating in the focus group?

___ Yes. → That's great. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this independent assessment. The focus group discussion will take 2 hours and will take place at **[insert name of place and address]** on **[insert date]**. You will receive \$50 for your participation. Your individual responses will be kept confidential, except as required by law, and you have the right to refuse to answer any questions. If you choose not to participate, this will not affect you in any way in your dealings with the USDA. We will be sending you a reminder postcard and making a follow-up reminder phone-call.

___ No. → Okay, may I ask you the reason why? **[Record reasons (refer to non-response answers)]**: _____. Thank you for your time.

B. ___ No.

→ Okay, let me tell you a little about the focus group discussion. It will take 2 hours and will be about your experience applying for a particular program, your opinion of the equity of the USDA business processes, and any barriers and successes of the application process. It will take place at **[insert name of place and address]** on **[insert date]**. You will receive \$50 for your participation. Your individual responses will be kept confidential, except as required by law, and you have the right to refuse to answer any questions. If you choose not to participate, this will not affect you in any way in your dealings with the USDA.

Would you be interested in participating in the focus group?

___ Yes. → That's great. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. We will be sending you a reminder postcard and making a follow-up reminder phone-call.

___ No. → Okay, may I ask you the reason why? **[Record reasons (refer to non-response answers)]**: _____.

Would you like us to resend the letter? Are you at this address **[insert address]**? I will re-mail the letter today and call back on **[insert date]**. Thank you for your time. **[End call]**.

Keep getting voicemail:

Hello, this is **(Name)** from Westat. I am calling you again because I previously left a message regarding participating in a focus group discussion about USDA program financial and technical assistance and did not hear back from you. Hearing your views and opinions about your experience is very important to us. My name again is **(Name)**. Please call me at XXX.XXX.XXXX.

Contacting a supplemental contact:

I'm trying to reach X, and X put down your name as an additional contact. Can you get the message to X that we are trying to get X to participate in a focus group discussion about the USDA program financial and technical assistance? Our number here is XXX.XXX.XXXX.

REMINDER!

[Insert Date]
for the
United States Department of Agriculture
Focus Group Discussion
at the

[Insert Name of Place]
[Insert Address]

Registration: 12:45 pm – 1:00 pm
1:00 pm – 3:00 pm

Light refreshments will be provided

Westat
1650 Research Blvd., RA 1201
Rockville, MD 20850