

Independent Assessment Focus Groups

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 or you have applied for and been denied 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. USDA has agreed that any information you provide will not be used against you in any litigation or any other proceedings between you and USDA. 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, may contact you soon to see if you are able to attend the focus group on (____) at (____). (There are a limited number of slots for the focus groups, and the recruiting process will end once a sufficient number of individuals have agreed to participate). If you are called, Westat will also ask you if you are represented by counsel in a lawsuit against the USDA or one of its agencies. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT WHETHER YOU SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN THE FOCUS GROUP, WE SUGGEST YOU CONSULT WITH COUNSEL. If you do have a claim against USDA or one of its agencies and decide to participate in the focus group, you will **not** be asked any questions about your claim. If you have questions or would like to volunteer to participate in a focus group, please call _____ at _____.

Thank you for considering participating in this important study.

Sincerely,

Misti Mukherjee, Esquire

Please see Public Burden Statement below.

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 0503-0018. 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.

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