

# Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Task Order 15: Message Testing

## Attachment 1: Background Information

---

### Objectives

The mission of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) is to protect the public's health from harmful chemical exposure. ATSDR scientists have worked in more than 8,000 U.S. communities assessing health risks from hazardous exposures.

Despite ATSDR's three decades of work, the general public and key public health stakeholders are unfamiliar with the federal agency and have limited understanding of ATSDR's role in protecting communities from harmful chemical exposure. This is due to the complex nature of environmental health and also to the external communication practices of the agency, including the lack of a consistent narrative of ATSDR.

To help ATSDR develop a consistent language for communicating with external audiences, ATSDR has contracted with a communications firm, CommunicateHealth, to create a series of messages that articulate simply and clearly information about the agency. CommunicateHealth will evaluate these messages for effectiveness through focus groups with representatives of 3 key ATSDR target audiences:

- Public health professionals
- Community members ("Community members" are individuals that have been affected by a toxic substance hazard in their community and, as a result, have been in contact previously with ATSDR.)
- Consumers ("Consumers" are representative members of the general public)

Specifically, ATSDR wants to learn:

1. Which messages are effective at communicating information about ATSDR? Which are not?
2. For those messages that are not effective, why aren't they effective? What could be changed to make them more effective?
3. What aspect of ATSDR's work do audiences find most challenging to understand?
4. What questions do target audiences have about ATSDR that are not addressed by these messages?

CommunicateHealth will deliver a topline summary of the focus group findings and recommendations.

## Participants

---

CommunicateHealth will conduct 4 focus groups, with 14 to 18 total participants. Focus group composition will reflect key target audiences as follows:

- 1 group with 3 – 4 public health professionals
- 1 group with 3 – 4 community members
- 2 groups with 4 – 5 consumers each

Consumer participants will represent a mix of the following characteristics:

- **Age:** 18 and over
- **Gender:** Mixed
- **Education Level:** Mixed (At least half of the participants will cite high school as the highest level of education completed)
- **Income:** Mixed
- **Race/Ethnicity:** Mixed
- **Geographic Location:** D.C. Metro area

### Recruitment

CommunicateHealth will recruit public health professionals and community members through contacts provided by ATSDR. CommunicateHealth will work with a professional recruitment firm, UserWorks, to recruit consumers with a mix of demographic characteristics including income and education levels.

## Methods

---

Focus groups with consumers will be held in-person at CommunicateHealth's office in Rockville, Maryland. Focus groups with community members and public health professionals will be held remotely using the Level 3 conference call platform. Each focus group session will last approximately 1 hour (and an additional 10 minutes for successfully screened consumer participants). This will include a moderator and a note taker. Focus groups will be audio recorded to assist with analyzing participant feedback and in writing the report.

The moderator will follow a standard protocol for the focus group that draws questions from the CDC Health Message Testing System (HMTS). The protocol will include:

- Welcome, opening remarks, and ground rules
- Explanation of the purpose of the focus group
- Consent form
- Reviewing and giving feedback on ATSDR messages
- Wrap-up questions
- Tokens of Appreciation to Focus Group Participants:
  - o Community members participating in the focus group remotely will be offered \$40 as a token of appreciation
  - o Consumers participating in the focus groups in person will be offered \$40 as a token of appreciation
  - o Public health professionals will not be offered cash gifts but will be thanked for their willingness to engage in the project.

Public health professionals will not be remunerated. They will participate voluntarily via phone during their own work hours.

Community members will be offered a \$40 cash gift in appreciation of their participation. This amount is consistent with the standard practice for qualitative data collection efforts and our experience from previous ATSDR projects with this population. The focus groups for community members although done remotely will require participants to make arrangements to have access to a phone line and be free of distractions during the focus groups. Additionally, this amount has been shown to lead to good recruitment and retention for the tasks required to enable the successful completion of the project. Consumers will be offered a \$40 cash gift in appreciation of their participation. This amount has been successful in recruiting participants for similar studies in the past with consumers. This amount has also been shown to be the minimum required incentive to offset the challenges for this audience to travel to and participate in a focus group or interview outside of their regular work hours in the Washington D.C. metro area. Incentive amounts lower than this make it difficult to recruit this audience. Sessions will only be conducted in English. No sensitive or controversial information will be collected in this study. The proposed data collection will have little or no effect on the respondent's privacy. Any written notes from the interviews will be labeled using random numbers and

not any information related to the participants' identity. Notes will be destroyed after the completion of the project and delivery of final report to ATSDR.

### **Handling of Data and Records**

No individually identifiable information is being collected. Only comments, quotes and responses from participants will be noted and used as feedback to inform revisions to the messages being tested.

### **IRB review**

This project has been reviewed by CDC Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) and received approval for exempt research on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013.

## **Top-Line Report**

---

CommunicateHealth will analyze feedback from the focus groups to identify important themes, preferences and communication needs from the 3 target audiences. Focus group findings will be summarized in a top-line report and will guide the revisions to ATSDR messages and inform recommendations on how to improve and expand upon ATSDR's communication language and materials.