

ATTACHMENT J.3
FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR GUIDE:
EMPLOYERS

EMPLOYER FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

A. Background

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. I am X, and this is my colleague X. We are from [organization] and we have been hired by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service to research the employment and training pilot program targeting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants in [site]. We asked to speak with employers who have been involved in the pilot program to determine how these new SNAP employment and training services have affected the business community.

- Before we start, I want to discuss the guidelines for today's discussion. Your participation today is voluntary. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to, and you can leave at any time. At the end of the group, you will receive a \$50 MAX Discover® prepaid card.
- What you say in this room will be considered private. We will summarize what we talk about today and combine it with information that we will gather from other groups like this. Nothing you say will ever be linked to your name. Please respect the privacy of others' comments.
- We want to hear different opinions, so if the rest of the group feels one way and you feel differently, please speak up. That information is really important to us because everyone here has probably had different experiences. There are no wrong answers.
- We have a lot to cover today and I might have to interrupt you to keep the conversation moving. Please don't take it personally; we have to make sure we get through all the questions we have for you in a short amount of time.
- The session will last about 90 minutes. We don't have a planned break, but please feel free to get up at any time to stretch, use the restroom, or help yourselves to something to eat or drink. We ask that only one person be out of the room at a time for a bathroom break.
- I would like to record our conversation today, but that is so I do not have to take many notes and can give you my attention. Nothing you say will ever be linked to your name or your business. If you have anything you would like to say off the record, just let me know and I can stop the recorder. Nothing you say will be shared with the SNAP agency. Your participation is voluntary. Do you agree to participate? Can we record the conversation?
- Do you have any questions for me before we get started?
- [Interviewer: Turn on the tape recorder.] Okay, I have now turned on the tape recorder. Can you each confirm that you agreed to let me tape this conversation? [Interviewer: Get verbal consent to tape on the tape recording.]

Are there any questions before we get started?

B. Introductions

Let's start by getting to know one another a little bit. Please, one at a time, share your:

- First name and your position or title
- What type of business do you work for [probe on what industry, if it is not clear] and how many employees work there?

C. Local economy

Let's talk about the local economy and your staffing needs.

- Based on your experience, how would you assess the overall state of the local economy over the past year?

Probes:

- How did the recession affect businesses and employment? What is the area's unemployment rate? Is it recovering? Has it recovered?
- Are major industries declining or growing?
- What is the current local demand for workers in your industry?
 - What types of workers are in the greatest demand? Are these mostly skilled or unskilled workers?
 - What skills or experience do you typically look for in potential hires? What skills do you find job applicants most typically lack?
 - What barriers do you face identifying and hiring appropriate workers?
 - How much turnover has your business had in the past two years? Is this a concern for you? If turnover is a problem, do you have a sense of what causes high turnover rates?
 - Have your hiring practices changed over the past few years? If so, in what ways? Why?
- What common barriers to employment do adults face in your community? [For example, lack of jobs overall, lack of prior work experience, low education levels, criminal records, disabilities, limited English proficiency, and so on.] Which barriers are most problematic for hiring in your business?

D. Motivation for pilot participation

Now I would like to discuss your roles in the SNAP employment and training pilot program and your motivations for participating.

- How is your business involved in the pilot?
 - Have you assisted in curriculum development? Do you provide mentorship opportunities for participants? Do you provide subsidized employment? On-the-job training? Job shadowing? Internships?

- How did you first hear about the pilot program?
 - Did you approach the [pilot lead agency] about your interest in becoming involved or did the agency approach you first? If so, who? Do you know how you were identified for participation?
 - Did you hear about it through any publicity or dissemination efforts by the [pilot lead agency]?
 - Do you remember when you first became involved?
 - Were you involved in the design of the program? If so, describe your role.
- Why did you decide to become involved in the pilot program?
 - Did you have any hesitation about doing so? If so, what caused it?
 - What are the advantages to your businesses of participating in the pilot?
 - What financial incentives were offered, if any, to participate?
 - Did the economy or other issues factor into your decision to participate? If so, describe.
 - Had you been involved with [pilot lead partners] in the past? Discuss briefly which other programs and for how long.
- Did you and your staff receive any type of orientation or guidance to the pilot program and its requirements?
 - If so, describe who was involved, who conducted the training or orientation, how long it was, and its format.
 - Were any ongoing training materials provided?
 - Was the training or information sufficient? If not, what was missing?
- How would you describe your relationship or your business's relationship with [pilot lead agency]? How long has your firm been working with it? Which staff do you work with at the agency? What kind of support do you received from the agency's staff?
- What are your arrangements with the [SNAP lead agency] for providing services through the SNAP employment and training process? Is there a formal or informal arrangement? If you provide training to SNAP employment and training participants, what else does the process entail?
 - [If formal:] Is there a contract? What are the terms of the contract? Were there any challenges negotiating a training contract?
 - Did you have any concerns about the contract?
 - [If informal:] What is the agreement for? Do you receive reimbursement for training or employing participants? If so, at what rate are you reimbursed? If you provide different opportunities to participants at your firms, how do the rates vary?
 - How was the reimbursement rate determined for participants' wages?

- If you are involved in hiring SNAP employment and training participants trained by other organizations as part of the pilot program, what does this process entail?
 - Are you committed to hiring a certain number of graduates per quarter or year?
 - Do you provide input into the training curricula? If so, to what extent did you have input, and how? How often did you provide input? Were changes to the curriculum made based on your input? What other input have you provided to the pilot program?
 - How many graduates have you hired in the past year? How are these graduates similar to or different from other hires you make?
 - What kind of reporting is required for the pilot? Please describe this reporting. Who in your firm tracks or collects the required data or completes required forms? To whom are the data or forms submitted? How frequently? Do you have any difficulty in tracking or submitting the information?
- E. Employer-based services for SNAP employment and training participants
- To how many pilot participants have you provided work experience or training—such as apprenticeships, job shadowing, or subsidized employment—under the SNAP employment and training program? Over what time period? How many are currently participating and in what types of services or offerings are they participating?
 - About how long are these initiatives? What is the number of weeks and hours per week, on average?
 - How were participants selected or matched to any of these services or offerings at your businesses? [Probe: Did you interview or screen participants? How much involvement did the employer have in the selection or placement? Did you decide who to take on or were participants assigned to you? If assigned, did your business provide criteria or lists of needed skills?]
 - How do the pilot program participants who have been at your business differ from any participants you have had from other programs or from your regular employees? Did the pilot participants meet your expectations? Were they prepared for working or training at your business when they arrived? Were they better prepared for working at your business after they completed their work experience or training?
 - What types of work are participants performing or being trained to perform?
 - Did the participants learn occupation-specific skills? Did they need any certification before their assignment with your business? Will they earn any certification or credentials at the end of their training or work experiences with your organization?
 - Who managed the participants involved in training or work experiences? What is the mentor's or supervisor's role in the business? What are the mentor's or supervisor's responsibilities related to working with pilot participants? How were they selected for this role?
 - As part of the training, do participants attend training-related classes or is most training on the job?

- What will the SNAP employment and training participant's status be when the training or placement is complete?
 - Do participants have the opportunity to be hired at your business or promoted to a higher-paid position? If so, will their unsubsidized wages differ from what they were during training? Can participants transition from training to a subsidized job? If so, how does this work?
 - If permanent employment is a possibility, about what proportion of participants do you expect will convert to permanent employment?
- Have any participants not completed their work experience or training? If so, what are some of the more common reasons for this? Were any participants not satisfied with the match? What were their reasons? How was this resolved? Did you have trouble with some participants not showing up for work? What were common reasons for this? How was this resolved? Were these types of problems more frequent with SNAP employment and training participants than other staff working for you?
- If you have any issues—such as attendance, work behavior, and so on— with SNAP employment and training participants, what is your recourse? How, if at all, do SNAP employment and training staff or case managers help?

F. Costs and benefits of participation

- What costs did your business incur to participate in the pilot program? [These could include staff time for planning, mentoring, monitoring, and training participants; planning and meeting time with partners; or lost productivity.]
- In what ways has the pilot program benefited your business [trained employees for openings, community relations, or increased productivity]? Have you realized or do you think you will realize your initial expectations for participating in the pilot program? Please explain.
- Do you believe that the pilot program is a useful workforce development strategy? Why or why not?
- Would you participate in future SNAP employment and training programs? Why or why not?
 - How do you think employers' involvement in programs such as SNAP employment and training could be improved? What additional training or services do you think SNAP participants need to be prepared for work at your business or industry?
 - [If applicable] Do you feel the wage supplementation rate for businesses such as yours is reasonable? If not, what would be a more reasonable cost-sharing system?
- What advice would you give to other employers considering participating in the SNAP employment and training programs?

Thank you! This conversation has been very helpful and we appreciate your assistance with our study. If you have any questions after today please feel free to contact us *[provide a business card if possible]*.

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 0584-xxxx. The time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average 90 minutes including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate to the Office of Policy Support, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, 3101 Park Center Drive, Room 1014, Alexandria, VA 22302.