

Attachment B: Focus Group Discussion Guide

PURPOSE: This is a full draft of the focus group protocol. It includes detailed questions and transitions between sections.

A. Welcome and Ground Rules (5 minutes)

1. **[ORIENTATION AS PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE]** [AS PARTICIPANTS ARRIVE, MODERATOR AND NOTETAKER WILL INVITE PARTICIPANTS TO HAVE A SEAT AT THE TABLE AND BEGIN COMPLETING THE DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE AND CONSENT FORM. THEY WILL INVITE PARTICIPANTS TO CHOOSE A PSEUDONYM AND WRITE IT ON A NAME TENT AND ON THEIR DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRES.]

2. **[WELCOME]** Welcome, everyone, and thank you for joining today's discussion! I know it takes a lot of planning and effort to participate in something like this, so I'm very grateful you were all able to make it. My name is [NAME], and I am from a company called Insight Policy Research. Insight is a research firm hired by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to talk to you and learn about your opinions today. I'll be guiding today's conversation. My colleague, [NAME], will be helping as well.

Today we'd like to learn about how you and your family make decisions about work, and how you make decisions about government benefits. Everyone in this room was invited to participate because they are working and receiving [PRIMARY PROGRAM] benefits, which will be the focus of our conversation. You are the experts here, so my goal is to spend more time listening to you than I spend talking. That said, I do need to take care of a few housekeeping items and cover a few ground rules before we start.

3. **[FORMS]** First, let's take care of some paperwork. Each of you should have received two documents when you arrived. One was a survey with a few questions about you and your family, like your age and the number of children who live with you. The other was a consent form, which describes your rights as a participant in this discussion and asks if you agree to participate. Has everyone turned in a survey and a consent form? [NOTETAKER TO COLLECT ALL REMAINING FORMS, SPOT-CHECK FOR COMPLETENESS, AND ASSIGN PARTICIPANT ID NUMBER TO FORMS]

Thank you very much!

4. **[GROUND RULES]** Now I just need to go over a few ground rules.

a. A focus group is just a guided discussion. As the facilitator, I have a set of questions that I'd like to cover today, but we encourage open conversation.

a. *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 0990-0421. The time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average 75 minutes 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.*

- c. This discussion will last about an hour and 15 minutes, and we will not take a formal break.
 - d. Please turn off your cell phones or set them to silent.
 - e. Restrooms are located [INSERT RESTROOM LOCATION].
 - f. Please don't hesitate to step out if you need to – you don't have to ask permission. However, please check before you go that only one person is up and out of the room at one time. This will keep our group from getting too small.
 - g. We are recording this session to be sure we can accurately remember what everyone says. Only people working on the project will have access to the recordings, and your responses will remain anonymous. [NOTETAKER] will also be taking notes today just in case the recordings aren't clear. Again, these notes will be kept private and will not identify anyone by their real name.
 - h. Please speak one at a time, in a voice as loud as mine, and avoid side conversations. This will help me follow the discussion and it will also help us with the recording and notes.
 - i. We need to hear from everyone today, but you don't have to answer every question.
 - j. There may be times in the discussion where you feel differently from other people and we want to hear about that. Even though you may feel differently than people in this room, you represent others who aren't here today who may have similar feelings.
 - k. We want to hear the good and the bad – there are no right or wrong answers here, and we respect differences of opinion.
 - l. I have a lot of questions to cover, so I may need to interrupt you to keep the conversation moving. Please don't take it personally; it's simply to ensure we cover all our questions today.
 - m. This session is confidential; your names will not be associated with anything you say. We ask that you respect each other's privacy as well once we leave his room – in other words, what happens in the focus group stays in the focus group!
5. [QUESTIONS] Does anyone have any questions about the ground rules or about this discussion? [*Moderator to address any final questions; check with notetaker that all paperwork has been collected and is in order; turn on recorder*]

B. Introductions (7 minutes)

Great! Let's start with some introductions.

1. You've all chosen a fake name to use for the discussion today. Let's go around the table and have everyone share:
 - a. Their "name" for the day and
 - b. A fictional character (like from a T.V. show, book, or movie) that has a job you'd like to have

C. Assess Factors That Affect Participants' Decisions About Work (7 minutes)

As I mentioned before, everyone here is working. But there are many things besides your daily job activities that might affect your work decisions, like competing demands in your personal life or other outside factors.

So, let's start by brainstorming the kinds of things that impact your work decisions. [Moderator moves to a previously set up piece of chart paper or whiteboard] I'll write a list with your ideas here.

2. If someone offered you a new job tomorrow, what are some things you would need to know about the job before you made a decision? [MODERATOR WRITES DOWN ALL IDEAS]
 - a. Probe as needed: What about [INSERT FROM LIST BELOW AS NEEDED]? How much of a factor would that be? Can you explain?
 - i. Availability of transportation or length of commute
 - ii. Availability of benefits, like insurance or vacation time
 - iii. Work schedule or number of hours
 - iv. Flexibility (to work at different times or from different locations)
 - v. Opportunities for promotions or higher pay
 - vi. Support for a disability
3. What are some factors *outside of work* that affect your ability to work or take on more hours? [MODERATOR WRITES DOWN ALL IDEAS AGAIN ON A DIFFERENT SHEET OF PAPER OR SECTION OF WHITEBOARD]
 - a. Probe as needed: What about [INSERT FROM LIST BELOW AS NEEDED]? How much of a factor would that be? Can you explain?
 - i. Caregiving responsibilities
 - ii. Your health or the health of a family member
4. How much control do you feel you have over your work, including the hours, where you work, and how much you get paid?
5. How, if at all, do government benefits like [PRIMARY PROGRAM] affect your decisions about work?

D. Assess Participants' Knowledge of Primary Safety Net Program (TANF, CCDF, or housing) and Secondary Program (e.g., SNAP, EITC, Medicaid/CHIP) (15 minutes)

[** refers to most critical questions that must absolutely get addressed during each focus group]

Now I would like to switch gears a bit and talk about benefits you receive. As I mentioned earlier, everyone here participates in [PRIMARY PROGRAM] - so let's start there.

Knowledge of [PRIMARY PROGRAM]

6. How long has everyone participated in [PRIMARY PROGRAM]?
7. **What are the rules for who can receive benefits through [PRIMARY PROGRAM]?

- a. Probe as needed: How did you learn about these rules?
- 8. ****[IF NOT ALREADY ADDRESSED]** How are the benefits you receive for [PRIMARY PROGRAM] tied to your income?
 - a. Probe as needed: What is the most money you can make and still be eligible for [PRIMARY PROGRAM]? [CLARIFY IF NEEDED: per month, per year, per hour]
- 9. What kinds of things, if any, are you supposed to report to the people who administer [PRIMARY PROGRAM]?
 - a. Probe as needed: Are you supposed to share any changes in your life circumstances, like having a child or taking a new job?
 - b. Probe as needed: What concerns do people have about reporting changes, if any?

Knowledge of [SECONDARY PROGRAM]

I'm curious to know how other benefit programs might be different from [PRIMARY PROGRAM]. Let's see if we can find another program that most people participate in through a show of hands.

I'll read you a list of other benefits – please raise your hands if you receive the program and keep them high so we can do a quick count. [MODERATOR READS FROM LIST BELOW, NOTES SECOND MOST COMMON PROGRAM, AND ASKS QUESTIONS ABOUT SECONDARY PROGRAM ONCE IDENTIFIED]

- ▶ SNAP
- ▶ EITC
- ▶ Medicaid
- ▶ CHIP

OK! It looks like the next most common program besides [PRIMARY PROGRAM] is [SECONDARY PROGRAM]. Let's talk about that a little bit.

- 10. ****What are the rules for who can receive benefits through [SECONDARY PROGRAM]?**
 - a. Probe as needed: How did you learn about these rules?
- 11. ****[IF NOT ALREADY ADDRESSED]** How are the benefits you receive for [SECONDARY PROGRAM] tied to your income?
 - a. Probe as needed: What is the most money you can make and still be eligible for [SECONDARY PROGRAM]? [CLARIFY IF NEEDED: per month, per year, per hour]
- 12. What kinds of things, if any, are you supposed to report to the people who administer [SECONDARY PROGRAM]?
 - a. Probe as needed: Are you supposed to share any changes in your life circumstances, like having a child or taking a new job?
 - b. Probe as needed: What concerns do people have about reporting changes, if any?

Overarching Knowledge and Experience with Safety Net Programs

- 13. Have your benefits [PRIMARY, SECONDARY, or other] ever changed because of changes in your income?
 - a. [IF YES]: Tell me about what happened.
 - b. [IF NO]: Has this happened to anyone you know?

E. Understand Participant Perceptions About How Increasing Earnings Affect Primary and Secondary Safety Net Program Benefits (36 minutes)

Thank you for all of your comments, this is really helpful!

We started today by talking about things that affect your work-related decisions, and we've covered things that affect your benefits – now, I want to combine those two topics and talk about how working affects your benefits and vice versa. We will do this part a bit differently.

First, I will give you a handout with a scenario on it. We will read it together, and then you will circle the option at the bottom of the sheet showing which option you'd choose. Then, we will have a discussion about each scenario. As we have our discussion, please think about that last question I asked you – whether your benefits have ever changed because of changes in your income. If you've had personal experiences that are similar to the situations we discuss, I'd like to hear them!

One last note - please leave the handouts at your seat today – we will collect these when our session is over.

[THE MODERATOR WILL DISTRIBUTE PENS AND BEFORE EACH SCENARIO DISCUSSION WILL DISTRIBUTE HANDOUTS WITH THE WRITE-UPS BELOW, SOME GRAPHICS, AND A PLACE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS TO INDICATE WHETHER THEY WOULD VOTE “YES” OR NO” IN RESPONSE TO EACH SCENARIO]

OK, let's get started!

[SCENARIO 1: GENERAL] (6 minutes)

Imagine this first scenario is about your friend, Claudia, who is a 26-year-old single mother of three [Note: document will contain a picture of “Claudia” and a speech bubble indicating she is asking the following question].

“Hey! I'm trying to make up my mind about something and I am hoping you can help me decide what to do. So you know that my family and I get [PRIMARY PROGRAM] benefits, and you know I've been working part time at the grocery store for the past 2 years. I'm making minimum wage right now and I don't get a ton of hours, but at least I don't have to pay much for childcare. During the school year, my kids are usually in school or at Head Start, and since I live a few blocks from my parents, they sometimes help with childcare - so we have been getting by.

Here's my question: My supervisor just said I could be shift manager at the store, which means I would be able to work more hours every week. She says I could make almost \$2,500 more every year. I'm a little nervous about losing my [PRIMARY PROGRAM] benefits, though. Do you think I should do it?”

If Claudia came to you asking for advice, would you tell her to take the promotion or say no?

14. Did everyone circle what they would tell Claudia to do? Great! Remember there are no right or wrong answers here, but I do want to know how everyone voted. [GATHER SHOW OF HANDS WITH PARTICIPANTS' VOTES]

- a. Tell me what made you decide to vote “yes” or “no.”
 - i. Probe as needed: What are some reasons she should take it, for those who voted “yes”?
 - ii. Probe as needed: What are some reasons she shouldn't take it, for those who voted “no”?

- b. How will Claudia's raise affect her [PRIMARY PROGRAM] benefits, if at all? What about any other benefits she might be receiving?
 - i. Probe as needed: Would the benefits go up, down, or stay the same? By how much? And how quickly?
- c. Would Claudia need to report this promotion to the [PRIMARY PROGRAM AGENCY NAME]?

[SCENARIO 2: PERSONAL, WAGE INCREASE] (15 minutes)

Imagine this scenario is about you. Your supervisor sits down with you to discuss your performance at work. *[Note: document will contain a picture of a supervisor and a speech bubble indicating she is asking the following question].*

"You have been doing a really great job here! I want to offer you a promotion and a raise, which will give you an additional \$1.50 per hour. This promotion will not change your job duties too much and the number of hours you work will stay the same. This is mostly just to reward all of your hard work and hopefully encourage you to keep working here for a while!"

Would you accept the promotion and the raise from your supervisor, or would you say no?

15. ****Did everyone circle their answer? Great! OK, let's talk about it.[GATHER SHOW OF HANDS WITH PARTICIPANTS' VOTES]**

- a. Tell me what made you decide to vote "yes" or "no."
 - i. Probe as needed: For those who voted "yes," what are some reasons you decided to vote that way?
 - ii. Probe as needed: For those who voted "no," what are some reasons you decided to vote that way?
- b. How would the raise affect your [PRIMARY BENEFITS], if at all? How would this affect your decision?
 - a. Probe as needed: Would the benefits go up, down, or stay the same? By how much? And how quickly?
- c. How would the raise affect your [SECONDARY BENEFITS], if at all? How would this affect your decision?
 - a. Probe as needed: Would the benefits go up, down, or stay the same? By how much? And how quickly?
- d. How would the raise affect any OTHER benefits that you receive, or hope to receive? Which ones would be most affected?
 - a. Probe as needed: Would the benefits go up, down, or stay the same? By how much? And how quickly?
- e. Are there any other factors that would affect your decision?

[SCENARIO 3: PERSONAL HOURS INCREASE] (15 minutes)

Now let's imagine a different scenario involving you and your supervisor. Pretend your supervisor comes to you at work with a question.

“I wanted to let you know that one of your coworkers just quit. Instead of hiring someone new to take her spot, I was wondering if you would like to pick up some of her hours. You can pick any hours that fit with your schedule.

I am thinking that, over the next year, you will make about \$4,000 more with the extra hours.”

Would you accept the extra hours, or would you say no?

16. **Did everyone circle their answers? [GATHER A SHOW OF HANDS WITH PARTICIPANTS' VOTES]

- a. Tell me what made you decide to vote “yes” or “no.”
 - i. Probe as needed: For those who voted “yes,” what are some reasons you decided to vote that way?
 - ii. Probe as needed: For those who voted “no,” what are some reasons you decided to vote that way?
- b. How would the raise affect your [PRIMARY BENEFITS], if at all? How would this affect your decision?
 - i. Probe as needed: Would the benefits go up, down, or stay the same? By how much? And how quickly?
- c. How would the raise affect your [SECONDARY BENEFITS], if at all? How would this affect your decision?
 - i. Probe as needed: Would the benefits go up, down, or stay the same? By how much? And how quickly?
- d. How would the raise affect any OTHER benefits that you receive, or hope to receive? Which ones would be most affected?
 - i. Probe as needed: Would the benefits go up, down, or stay the same? By how much? And how quickly?
 - ii. Probe as needed: If they change, would they change suddenly or gradually? How long would it take for the change to occur?
- e. As you were thinking about your answer for this scenario, where did your understanding of what might happen come from? In other words, where do you get information about benefits and income?
 - i. Probe as needed: From your supervisor, case manager, friends, family, the news/social media?
- f. Are there any other factors that would affect your decision?

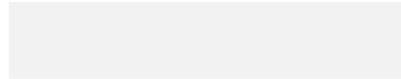
17. If you were faced with situations like these, where would you go for information?

- a. Probe as needed: From your supervisor, case manager, friends, family, the news/social media?

F. Wrap-Up and Close (5 minutes)

Thank you all for sharing your opinions and experiences with me today. This has been very helpful. We are almost done, but I just have two more questions to make sure we didn't miss anything.

18. Is there anything else that affects your work decisions that we haven't talked about today?



19. Is there anything else that affects your benefits that we haven't talked about today?