

Instructions for Site Visitors

This interview guide contains the following sections:

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4. Focus Group Discussion Ground Rules for Facilitators
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Introductory Script

Introduction of Facilitator:

Hello, my name is _____, and I'll be leading our discussion today. My role is to direct the discussion and to make sure that we cover the topics of interest.

Purpose of the Focus Group:

Thank you for being part of this discussion group. Today's discussion is part of a study sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. We are interested in learning more about the day-to-day influence of the organizational culture of [insert local program name] or other TANF agencies on their clients. Organizational culture means the unspoken rules of the agency and how things get done.

The Administration for Children and Families hired two outside groups to conduct this study, MEF Associates and MDRC. I work for MEF Associates and am based in [city]. During the next 90 minutes, I will ask you about the types of services you have received and your interactions with [insert agency name] staff. The information you share today will help the Administration for Children and Families better understand how TANF office cultures affect services for customers like you.

Disclosure:

We will be taking notes during today's conversation. The study team wants to use information gathered today and from similar conversations in other cities to write a report that describes families' experiences with TANF or [insert local program name] program services. Every effort will be made to keep information private to the extent permitted by law. You will not be identified in this conversation, and no information about you, including your first name, will appear in any notes shared with the government or [insert local agency name] or in any written report. I hope that you will feel comfortable speaking about your experiences. Of course, if there are any topics or questions that you do not want to answer, you can choose not to say anything.

*This discussion will take about **90 minutes**. Your participation is voluntary and not required to receive any services or benefits. You will receive a \$25 gift card for your participation.*

Finally, I want to make sure everyone has filled out the paperwork. This includes a consent form that gives me permission to take notes and audiotape this session as well as a participant information form. Please let me know if you have not filled out these forms.

Consent Form
TANF Office Culture Study

Thank you for agreeing to participate in today’s discussion. Your participation is very important to this study. MEF Associates is working with [*insert local program name*] and programs like this around the country that provide services to families like yours. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is funding this study. The information you share today will help HHS and TANF agencies better understand how TANF office cultures affect services for customers like you.

This discussion will last about 90 minutes. We will ask you about your experience accessing services at [*insert local program name*]. During the discussion, please use only your first name.

Your participation is voluntary and involves no significant risks to you. Whether or not you participate, it will have no effect on benefits you receive from [*insert local program name*], or any other organizations. You can choose not to answer any of the questions. You may leave the focus group at any time.

We will take notes and audio record the discussion. Only members of the research team will hear the recording. The notes and recording will be destroyed at the end of this study. We will not share any information about you with anyone outside the research team, and we will ask all participants to not discuss or share anything they have heard after leaving the discussion group. However, there is always a risk that other people in the group may reveal what was discussed in the focus group, or people outside the research team will see the information you provide. However, we will securely store the notes to minimize the risk that others see them. We will not include your name or any other identifying information in any reports from the study, and we will not use your name or any other personal information in any quotes we use. Information will be kept private to the extent permitted by law.

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research, you are not satisfied with the response of the research team, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the project director, Mary Farrell, at MEF Associates at 703-838-2723 at any time.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

Signing this consent form indicates that you understand and are willing to participate in this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have received a copy of this signed and dated consent form.

Participant Name (please print: _____

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Name of Researcher obtaining this Authorization: _____

The Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This collection of information is voluntary and will be used to help HHS and TANF agencies understand how TANF office cultures affect services for clients like you. Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 90 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and reviewing the collection of information. An agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number. The OMB number and expiration date for this collection are **OMB #: 0970-XXXX, Exp: XX/XX/XXXX**. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Mary Farrell at mary.farrell@mefassociates.com, or call (703) 838-2723.

Participant Information Form

1. What is your sex?
 - Male
 - Female

2. How old are you? __ 18 - 20 years __ 31-40 years __ 56+ years
 __ 21-30 years __ 41-55 years

3. Including yourself, how many adults and children are currently living in your household?
 __ Adults (18 or older)
 __ Children (under 18)

4. What is your primary language? _____

5. What is your highest degree or level of school completed?
 - Less than grade 9
 - Some secondary school (9 to 12 years of secondary school but did not graduate)
 - High school/secondary school (graduated), or equivalent
 - Some college or university but no college degree
 - Two-year/Associates degree
 - Four-year/Bachelor's degree or higher

 - Another degree or certificate _____

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Ground Rules:

Before we begin, let me go over a couple of discussion group rules.

- *I want to keep the discussion informal and comfortable.*
- *I did not schedule a break. If you need to get up to use the restroom, stretch or get a drink, please do so as needed. The restrooms are located [xxx].*
- *Please only tell us your first name. This will help us keep your information private. Please also refer to each other only by first name.*
- *During the discussion, please ask me if something is not clear.*
- *There are no right or wrong answers. You can say positive and negative comments about your experiences.*
- *It is okay to share your opinions or thoughts even if they are different from what others have said. We want everyone to participate, and the opinions and experiences of everyone in the room are important. We want to hear different perspectives.*
- *Please talk one at a time so that I can hear everything that is said.*
- *I want to hear from all of you. Some people talk more than others, and I'll be encouraging everyone to speak up.*
- *You do not have to answer any specific questions you do not want to answer. If at any point you want to pause the recording while you make a specific comment, please ask me.*
- *The discussion today is private. The research team will not tell your caseworker or anyone at the agency or government what you say. We will not include your name or identifying information in reports. Also, we ask that you also please do not discuss or share anything you heard after you leave the discussion group.*
- *If you have a cell phone, please turn it off or put it on silent.*

Do you have any questions before we start?

Focus Group Questions

Former and Current TANF Recipients

Warm Up/Introductions

First, we'd like everyone to introduce themselves. Could everyone please go around the room and state your first name only and what your favorite thing is about [insert current season]?

I. Perceptions of Agency Processes

Thank you. Now we'd like to learn more about your experiences with [insert agency name] while you were receiving TANF, or [insert local name for program].

A. Application for services

Let's start by thinking about the first time you contacted [insert agency name] to apply for services.

Note to interviewer: Direct clients to describe in-office vs. remote application process based on understanding of agency's process outlined in advance by agency staff. If both options exist and are commonly used, ask in-office probes but follow-up about agency's virtual communication in Section II: Communications with Agency Staff, below.

- What was your experience like?
 - Probes for initial services provided in-office:
 - What were you expecting when you went into [insert agency name]?
 - Was it clear what you were supposed to do once you entered the office?
 - Was it crowded? Empty?
 - What was the furniture like? What was on the walls? On the tables?
 - How long did you wait?
 - How did you feel you were treated?
 - Were your needs met?
 - Probes for initial services provided remotely (i.e. telephone, mail, web-based process)
 - What were you expecting when you contacted [insert agency name]?
 - How long did you wait?
 - How were you treated?
 - Were your needs met?
 - Was it clear what you were supposed to do after your [call, application submission, other]?

B. Employment services

Now let's talk about your experience with [insert agency name] beyond your first office visit when you began working with [insert local name for **employment services (i.e. welfare-to-work) component** of TANF program or contracted providers, if more commonly known by their name].

Note to interviewer: 1) In some states, clients will interact with both the contracted employment services (i.e. welfare-to-work) provider and TANF agency staff, while in other states they do not physically interact with TANF agency staff. In the former case, probe on their perceptions about interactions with both TANF agency and contracted employment services staff. 2) Participants may be required to complete other activities (e.g., barrier removal) in addition to their employment-related activities as part of their TANF participation requirements. While questions below focus on clients' perceptions of the agency's employment services program components, we are interested in their perception of related processes as well (e.g., referral to the employment services provider).

- Generally speaking, how easy is it to understand what the [insert agency name] wants you to do?
- How easy is it to meet the requirements?
 - What aspects are particularly easy for you?
 - What aspects are most challenging?
 - *Probe: Attending initial orientation, understanding print communications, ongoing reporting requirements*
- Has anything changed about working with [insert agency name] since you first started coming here?

II. Communication with Agency Staff

Now let's talk about your interaction with [insert agency name] staff.

Note to interviewer: Please adapt questions based on local staffing and partner contracting model, explored in advance of client interviews.

- How do you typically communicate with your [local agency title for primary case manager]? For example, by phone, email, or mail?
 - Does this form of communication work for you?
 - Are you ever required to go into the office? If so, why?
 - [If yes]: How would you describe the nature of your in-person communication with agency staff?
 - Does your caseworker usually explain what is going on and what you're required to do? Are there ever times when these expectations are confusing?
 - If so, is your caseworker able to help you with your questions?
- Do you and your caseworker get along? What is a typical communication between you like?
 - Does your caseworker listen to you? Do they try to help you based on what they've heard?
 - [If not]: What do you think they are focused on during those interactions instead?
 - Overall, do you feel that your caseworker treats you with respect?
 - Why? Why not?

III. Assessment of Agency’s Organizational Culture

- What do you think the main goal of [*insert agency name*] is?
- We are interested in something called “organizational culture,” which is kind of like the “vibe” from staff and how things operate within an organization. How would you describe the “vibe” at [agency]?
 - *Probe: In this office? On the phone or in writing?*
- How do you think the agency’s “vibe” or “culture” that you just described relates to your success in the program?
 - Is it helpful?

IV. Conclusion

- Overall, how would you describe your experience with [*insert agency name*]?
 - What has gone well?
 - What hasn’t gone well??
- Is there anything you would recommend to make the program work better for you or future clients (for example, location, hours, the way your caseworker interacts with you,, etc.)?
- Is there anything staff could do to communicate better or be more helpful?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with us today?
- Thank you for speaking with us about [*insert agency name*]’s processes, goals, and organizational culture.