

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are small, facilitated discussion groups used to gain a better understanding of stakeholders' opinions, needs, and expectations. Focus group participants can be selected randomly or to represent the demographics of the community. A trained moderator typically leads the groups and draws out people's reactions. A focus group usually consists of three separate group sessions of seven to 12 individuals. Although appearing informal, focus group discussions are structured around a series of questions carefully designed to help people talk freely. By holding separate focus group sessions with different groups of participants, you can find out exactly how each group feels, and why. This helps you address group concerns and find common ground to unify the community.

Required activity?

No.

Additional information about focus groups can be found in Chapter 5 of the [2016 Edition of the RCRA Public Participation Manual](#).

Making it Work

When to Use

Focus groups are useful to learn about citizen knowledge and expectations. Focus groups also help you learn why groups of people feel as they do. By understanding where opinions and beliefs come from, you can more effectively address concerns and avoid problems. Focus groups foster communication better than large public meetings where individual discussion is not practical. Focus groups may provide feedback to improve outreach tools. If you sense that a particular group of stakeholders is unhappy, a focus group is an excellent way to begin a meaningful dialogue without exposing the entire community to issues that are pertinent to only a small group.

How to Use

First, identify focus group participants and invite them individually to participate. Invite participants who will contribute to the process, who may have something thoughtful or thought-provoking to say, who won't be intimidated, and who won't argue for argument's sake. Have a list of 15-20 people to allow for those who fail to attend. You do not have to rent a fancy facility with two-way mirrors. However, the facility should comfortably accommodate up to 13 people (the facilitator plus 12 participants) around one table. There should also be room for an additional desk and chair for the assistant moderator, and several additional chairs to accommodate observers, such as yourself. The chairs should be comfortable. The facility must meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Finding a time and location that satisfies everyone is impossible, so select a place that is centrally located and convenient and a date and time that is convenient for you, your moderator, and the majority of participants. Focus group meetings usually last about two hours. EPA will not pay for food or beverages, either directly or indirectly through its contractors. Other things to keep in mind include:

- Facility owners/operators may want to use focus groups as a complement to interviews during the community assessment or at the time of other important activities during the life of the facility.
- The permitting agency should consider using focus groups to gauge public opinion before permitting activities or corrective action.

- Consider using focus groups rather than interviews for information needs that arise after the **Public Participation Plan** has been drafted.
- If you have limited resources but need to do more interviews, consider using focus groups to supplement the initial interviews. In this way you can easily get data from additional citizens without significantly impacting your resources.

Checklist for Focus Groups

- Use a trained, objective, third-party facilitator
- Make sure your facilitator understands the objectives.

Focus Group Preparation

- Choose a good time for the focus group.
- Identify and invite the target audience for each focus group.
- Identify and schedule the facilitator.
- Work with the facilitator to script the introduction and questions.
- Identify and book venue.

During the Focus Group

- Inform everyone that the purpose is not to reach consensus, but to gather information.
- Create a brief evaluation and ask participants to complete the form before they leave.

After the Focus Group

- Review answers to the questions.
- Send thank-you letters to all participants.