

## Lessons Learned: Sharing Tips for Planning, Recruiting, and Hosting a Focus Group



### Method:

On the January 5th, 2021 Tech Lead Call, Help@Hand counties/cities who had already conducted a focus group, discussed what efforts they took to plan, recruit, and lead a focus group. CalMHSA guided the conversation by asking counties/cities to explain their recruitment methods, the strategies their county/city used to communicate with participants, and their reasoning for each. Counties/cities were also asked about the goals of the focus group, whether they were clearly defined going into the focus group and whether counties/cities were able to reach their target population. Members of the Help@Hand evaluation team were also invited to share how they were able to support counties/cities with their focus groups. All were asked to share observations and experiences too. Together, counties/cities shared several key lessons that other Help@Hand counties/cities could use in their focus group planning.

### PLANNING

- 1. Define the purpose of the focus group.** Think about why your county/city is facilitating a focus group. Define what the goal of the focus group is.
- 2. Be intentional about your target audience.** Determine who should attend the focus group. Is it a specific audience (ex. TAY, older adults, individuals who've experienced mental health, etc.) or do you want information from the general population? One county/city highlighted that when working with TAY, one needs to think about who are the TAY we're working with and where they are. Another county/city explained that they focused on a specific target audience because of differences in digital literacy and needs. They also shared that it makes the target audience feel heard.
- 3. Maximize impact.** Identify who has access to the target population. If it's outside of your organization, start asking organizations, individuals, and/or other entities that work with this population if they'd be willing to do outreach and recruitment for the focus group. Reaching out to established connections and important relationships is one way to find others to support your efforts. Moreover, one county/city pointed out that if staffing allows, texting reminders to contacts is useful.
- 4. Be aware of collaborator's timelines and policies.** If collaborating, consider that other organizations may have different timelines and procedures. If you find differences that will impact the planning, recruitment, or success of the focus group, consider what changes will be needed. For instance, because of the time it would take to distribute gift cards, one county/city chose to offer gift baskets instead.
- 5. Offer incentives that support the target community.** Decide on incentives for participating in the focus group. Thinking about TAY, one suggestion was to create a certificate for participation, extra credit, or ways to include this on their resume.
- 6. Ensure all team members are on the same page.** One county/city explained that they developed a PowerPoint presentation and live demo. Then, made sure that staff had a shared understanding of how to frame the presentation and the demo.
- 7. Identify a champion.** A strong advocate within the team has enhanced the success of the focus groups.

## RECRUITMENT

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8. **Use multiple methods of recruitment.** Counties/cities used flyers, emails, text messages, and videos. One county/city shared that the County Supervisors appreciated videos shared with them about the product. One county/city shared that if they were to do this again, they would follow-up with others because some people don't check their email.
9. **Ensure all recruitment materials and efforts include all pertinent information about the focus group.** For instance, one county/city shared that their flyers included information on the purpose of the focus group, dates of the focus group and listed vendors that would be demonstrating their product during the focus group.
10. **Consider using different names for the focus group.** As suggested by one county/city focus groups could be renamed to something more inviting such as game night or a listening session.
11. **Recognize that outreach is essential.** Use all opportunities to recruit individuals to be part of the focus group.
12. **Use multiple recruiters.** If needed ask staff from organizations that have access to the targeted audience to help with recruitment. Counties/cities used county Peers, a peer support team, and clinical staff who emailed clients who were part of the target group. For example, clinical staff helped recruit participants by emailing clients who were part of the target population. Likewise, peer support teams reached out to the target audience to build rapport and inform them about the focus group.
13. **Double and triple your effort.** Recruitment efforts should be doubled or tripled during COVID. One county/city pointed out that to reach the same level of engagement they had prior to COVID, they advised outreach efforts to be doubled or tripled by using peers to support outreach and engagement.

## FOCUS GROUP DESIGN

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14. **Include all stakeholders.** Ensure a representative from each stakeholder group contribute to the focus group design. Remember that the target audience is a stakeholder too.
15. **Use open-ended questions.** Write questions so that participants will be able to answer them.
16. **Leverage local resources** or existing knowledge that can be used when designing the focus group. For instance, one county/city used findings from multiple University and agency surveys to learn about needs that had already been identified. They, in turn, were able to further explore these needs during their focus group.

## ADDITIONAL TIPS

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17. **During COVID, consider additional ways to keep participants engaged.** As one county/city noted prior to COVID, providing pizza during the focus group kept the target audience interested and engaged in the focus group. Since COVID, focus groups were no longer facilitated in one room. As such, facilitators used novel ways keep participants interested and engaged. For instance, while conducting a focus group with TAY, peers wore cool hats that kept participants entertained during the focus group.
18. **Use all forms of communication for focus groups.** Include options to use the phone because some people do not have access to zoom.
19. **Keep in mind that participants terminology may differ from others.** Make sure that everyone is speaking about the same thing. During one focus group, a participant stated that their phone was broken. In actuality, the phone was out of storage.

### *People like participating!!*

Focus group participants can be very engaged, informative, and interested in becoming a part of the upcoming pilot project.