

Conducting Aging Well Focus Groups

AGING WELL IN COMMUNITIES: A TOOLKIT FOR PLANNING, ENGAGEMENT & ACTION

Focus groups provide nuanced, in-depth, qualitative information about the opinions and needs of a group or community as they relate to specific aging well issues.



A Center of the Public Health Institute

Introduction

Focus groups can be an important part of planning for aging well in your community, along with surveys and public forums. (For more information, see “Conducting Aging Well Resident Surveys” and “Conducting Aging Well Public Forums.”) Focus groups help you gain more information about key issues identified in public forums; help clarify survey data; and elicit input from important cultural or linguistic groups that were not well represented in other parts of your planning process.

Before you conduct aging well focus groups, we strongly recommend that you review “Community Planning for Aging Well: An Overview.” It discusses key foundational elements of a successful aging well planning process, including:

- Understanding how planning for aging well in the community is different from other planning efforts
- Deciding what role local government should play
- Forming a broad-based, representative planning committee
- Choosing language that will attract boomers and engage them in your effort
- Developing cultural competence
- Gathering data from your community
- Reporting and using your results

What is a Focus Group?

Focus groups provide qualitative information about the opinions and needs of a group or community. Their value lies in the opportunity they present to probe deeper on specific issues and gain a more in-depth, nuanced understanding of how a key group or members of your community perceive one or more of the aging well issues you have identified.

A focus group is typically:

- Conducted as a structured discussion among a small group
- Guided by an experienced facilitator

- Intended to gather opinions on a specific topic
- Composed of participants who are carefully selected and usually share some common interests or characteristics (for instance, boomer-aged adults), but who are different enough to provide a variety of perspectives

Focus groups are exactly that: focused. They are not rambling discussions on any topic that comes to mind. The facilitator’s job is to keep the group on track so that the discussion produces the desired information. The environment is designed to make participants feel comfortable sharing their honest opinions, responding to others’ thoughts, and interacting with each other.

Focus groups are different from both surveys and public forums. Surveys typically consist of written, closed-ended, relatively narrow questions that are quantitatively scored. Often the person taking the survey responds with a numerical rating, or selects a point along a continuum, such as “strongly agree” or “somewhat disagree.” In contrast, focus group participants give verbal responses to open-ended, relatively broad questions. Responses are not scored per se, but can be analyzed for patterns, themes, and trends. Public forums usually identify major issues and themes across a broad cross-section of the community, while focus groups produce qualitative, in-depth information on particular issues, often those that have emerged from an aging well public forum and/or survey.

Advantages of focus groups Focus groups are one of the best tools available for collecting qualitative information because they:

- Produce a lot of information in a short amount of time
- Generally cost less and sometimes require less preparation than surveys, large forums, or individual interviews (depending on the number and complexity of the focus groups)

- Capitalize on people’s natural tendency to interact with each other, which can lead to unanticipated discussion topics and useful information
- Yield in-depth, nuanced information, including nonverbal responses, so you can get closer to what people are really thinking and feeling
- Provide information from non-English speakers, those who are less literate, and those who are more comfortable in small groups and/or with verbal communication
- Generate results that are easy to understand and more accessible to decisionmakers than complex statistical analyses of survey data

Caveats about focus groups

- Focus groups assess what participants say, but cannot determine how they will act.
- A focus group’s success is closely tied to the skill of its facilitator.
- Results should not be generalized to a larger population, because focus group participants may not comprise a random or representative sample. In other words, don’t jump to conclusions based on a small group of participants and miss important perspectives from those who did not participate.

Before the Focus Group

If you have already conducted an aging well public forum, broad-based visioning exercise, or resident survey, you may want to use a focus group (or a series of focus groups) to:

- Delve deeper into previously identified key issues, such as housing or mobility
- Clarify contradictory or ambiguous survey data or forum themes
- Obtain input from target groups you were not able to engage in your forum or survey, such as people with limited fluency in English or residents of outlying areas
- Address topics that couldn’t be easily asked about or responded to on your written survey
- Gain insight into why people hold certain opinions or views

“Remember that the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about populations but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation.”

—Mary Marczak, University of Arizona

If you haven’t yet launched an aging well planning process, focus groups can help you:

- Delve deeper into previously identified key issues, such as housing or mobility
- Determine how to attract and engage boomers in aging well issues (for more on this challenging task, see “Understanding How Planning for Aging Well is Different” in “Community Planning for Aging Well: An Overview.”)
- Gather specific information on an aging well topic currently of interest to your community, such as engaging boomers in community service or determining boomers’ educational priorities

SHOULD YOU CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP?

A key first step in planning a focus group is deciding what you want to know, and whether a focus group is the best way to gain that information. Ask yourself these questions:

- Why do I want to conduct a focus group?
- What do I hope to learn?
- Is a focus group the best way to get the information I want?
- How will the information add to what I already know?
- How will the information be used, and by whom?

The number of focus group sessions to conduct depends on the type of information you want to obtain, as well as available resources. Conducting multiple focus group sessions, if possible, allows you to involve more people and can help you identify patterns or trends in perceptions, as well as differences among diverse groups (for instance, younger boomers compared with those closer to retirement age, or members of different racial/cultural groups). A general rule of thumb is to continue conducting focus group sessions until most of the information is repetitive, and little new information is produced.

How should you select participants and motivate them to attend your focus groups?

Choose focus group participants purposefully and carefully. Depending on the information you seek, group members can be homogeneous or represent a variety of backgrounds and interests. In deciding on participants for your focus groups:

- Consider your purpose and who can provide the type of information you want to obtain
- Aim for six to 10 participants per focus group session; having more than 12 participants often becomes unwieldy, and fewer than four makes it difficult to spark a lively conversation
- Invite more participants than your target number to allow for the inevitable declines and no-shows
- Avoid placing people who already know each other in the same group; it can inhibit frank responses
- Select participants who are likely to be talkative and thoughtful
- Look to your planning committee for suggestions

Some people participate in focus groups because they want to make a difference in their community (a common attitude among boomers), or they think they might learn something or enjoy a new experience. But not everyone shares those motives. Offering an incentive

increases the likelihood that your target audience will accept the invitation and actually attend the focus groups. Here are a few ideas to consider

- **Money**—If your budget allows it, paying participants (even a small amount) is an excellent motivator.
- **Refreshments**—Depending on the time of day, consider serving a meal or offering substantial snacks and beverages.
- **Gifts**—Offer something that will appeal to your invitees; ask local businesses or other sources for donations.
- **Recognition**—Acknowledge the participation and contributions of focus group members at a public meeting, in any media coverage, and/or in reports of your aging well planning process.
- **Training**—Provide complimentary registration for workshops or classes (for instance, fitness, healthy cooking, photo software) offered by the community services department, local community colleges, or others in your community.

Once you have compiled a list of potential participants, you can begin contacting them. Start by sending a written, personalized invitation by mail or email. Be sure to include all relevant details, such as date, time, location, and whether you're offering an incentive for participation. As with any communication with boomers about aging well, be sure to word the invitation carefully, using terms that will be acceptable rather than offensive. For example, instead of referring to "old age," say "prime time" or "midlife." Consider making an appeal to boomers' idealism and their desire to make a difference. Remember that many boomers, regardless of their technical expertise, place great value on their connections with others in the community. Consequently, they may not respond well to impersonal email or text messages. (For more on communicating with boomers, see "Choosing the Right Language" in "Community Planning for Aging Well: An Overview.")

Follow up on the invitation with a personal phone call. Having someone who knows the potential participant make the call often increases the likelihood of success. Your planning committee can be very helpful in this effort. Once someone has agreed to participate in a focus group, send a confirmation note by mail or email with the date, time, location, and other pertinent details. Finally, be sure to call participants the day before the focus group to remind them about the event and answer any last-minute questions.

If you are targeting a specific cultural, linguistic, or racial group for your focus groups, it will likely be helpful, and perhaps crucial, to use community-based and intermediary organizations to enlist participants. Consider contacting faith groups, health care and human service providers, cultural associations, and other organizations relevant to your target group. Members of your planning committee who are also members of target groups are an invaluable resource—they can identify and engage focus group participants, and help develop questions and design the environment to ensure comfort and trust levels that will produce the desired information. (For more on communicating with diverse groups, see “Developing Cultural Competence” in “Community Planning for Aging Well: An Overview.”)

Obtaining written consent from your focus group participants is advisable. The Community Partnership for Older Adults suggests including the following information in your consent form: “An explanation of why the person is participating; a discussion of any stipends or other compensation being provided; an agreement to keep other participants’ comments confidential; and a release statement allowing organizers to use any information, quotes, or photos obtained during the process.”

When and where should you hold your focus groups? Getting boomers who are busy with work, teens, elderly parents, and their own interests to a focus group can be difficult. You need to make it as easy as possible for them to attend. Try to match the location and timing of your focus groups to the topics you want to cover and the people you want to participate. For example, if you’re trying to recruit working boomers, a lunchtime focus group at a downtown restaurant or business park might be more convenient and draw more participants than one held at 2 p.m. at a school in a residential area. Avoid conflicts with other activities and events, such as adult/youth sports, theater, school activities, fundraisers, and similar regular or special events. Choose an easily accessible location with adequate parking and

CHECKLIST—FOCUS GROUP LOCATION

- Be sure the room is comfortable, with adequate airflow, natural lighting, and adjustable heating and air conditioning.
- Check the room’s layout and acoustics to be sure they are conducive to audiotaping and videotaping.
- Choose a location with limited distractions.
- Provide comfortable chairs.
- Seat participants in a circle or semicircle to encourage dialogue and open communication. Use round tables or arrange chairs so participants can see each other.
- Consider using a facility specifically designed for focus group testing. These facilities usually offer testing rooms with one-way mirrors that allow focus group sponsors to observe sessions. They may also offer focus group design, facilitation, and recording services.

public transportation service. Consider offering respite and/or childcare if you are targeting boomers with aging parents or children. You can also build your logistics around the participants. Once you have a group of people who have agreed to attend a focus group, you can poll them to determine the best date, time, and location. This approach is particularly helpful if you're trying to engage specific individuals.

Who should facilitate your focus groups?

Choosing the right facilitator is key to the success of your focus groups. If at all possible, use a professional facilitator with experience conducting focus groups and a background in aging issues. Involve the facilitator early in the process to help design your focus groups, devise effective recruitment strategies, and develop appropriate questions that will elicit the information you seek.

Consider the following when selecting a facilitator:

- Choose an outsider. If participants don't know the facilitator, they're more likely to give candid information. This is particularly important in smaller towns, where more people know each other.
- Avoid the temptation to use local government staff, unless they have the expertise and experience needed to be an effective facilitator. Excluding staff also removes the perception that a government "agenda" is being imposed on the process.
- Select someone who is familiar with the cultural norms of important groups in your community, especially cultural attitudes about aging and elders.
- Choose a facilitator who has characteristics similar to those of participants. When discussing topics related to aging well, a younger Generation Y facilitator may be less effective than a boomer-aged facilitator.
- Look to your aging well partners. There may be staff within their organizations who are capable of facilitating your focus groups.

Don't be discouraged if your budget does not allow you to hire a professional facilitator. It is certainly possible to find qualified facilitators within your own organization, partner agencies, or the larger community. When the Monterey City Library partnered with the Monterey Bay Aquarium and a local hospital to plan for ways to increase boomer participation in community volunteerism, it opted to conduct two focus groups: one with active volunteers, and one with people who were not currently volunteering. The library director and the aquarium's volunteer director both had extensive experience with focus groups and served as the leaders for the two groups. Staff from partner agencies also assisted by recording responses and helping to moderate the groups.

Using a facilitation team can be an effective way to moderate your focus groups. A facilitator can ask questions, guide the discussion, and take minimal notes. An assistant can take detailed and comprehensive notes, operate the audio and/or video recorder, adjust the heat or air conditioning, and respond to any interruptions. Except for the facilitator, an assistant, and participants, there should be no other people in the room during the focus group. This helps participants feel comfortable and encourages open, frank discussion.

What types of questions should you ask, and how do you develop them?

To develop focus group questions, revisit your purpose and what information you hope to obtain. Here are some guidelines:

- Prepare questions in advance—this is essential. Be sure to get input from your planning committee and focus group facilitator, if possible.
- Develop open-ended questions. Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."
- Develop questions that are focused enough to keep the discussion on track, while also open-ended enough to spark ideas and keep the conversation going.

CHECKLIST—PLANNING AGING WELL FOCUS GROUPS

- Have we fully engaged our planning committee and drawn on their knowledge, expertise, and community connections?
- Are we leveraging the focus group planning process to further engage our planning committee members in long-term planning and solutions for aging well?
- Have we decided what we want to accomplish through our focus groups? What information do we hope to obtain?
- Have we determined who should participate in our focus groups and developed an effective strategy to engage them, including boomer-friendly language, personal contacts, and incentives?
- Have we developed culturally competent strategies to engage members of our community’s racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and other groups, and to ensure their voices are heard?
- Have we chosen dates, times, and locations that make it as easy as possible for our focus group participants to attend?
- Have we designed the focus group environment to be comfortable and conducive to a lively, interactive discussion?
- Have we crafted our focus group questions to overcome boomers’ avoidance and denial of aging issues?
- Have we selected an experienced facilitator?
- Have we developed and tested our focus group questions to be sure we will obtain the information we want?

- Word questions so that they are easy to understand and neutral—questions should not imply a particular perspective, or they could influence responses.
- Pilot test the questions. Be sure they elicit the type of information you want.
- Think of the list of questions as a guide, rather than a script. During the actual focus group sessions, questions should appear to be spontaneous and flow logically with the conversation.

When deciding how many questions to ask, a general rule of thumb is to plan on covering five or six aspects of a particular topic. For example, if the topic of your focus group is future housing needs, you might want to ask

participants about their anticipated needs and preferences for a variety of housing options, such as remaining in their current homes, living with family members, moving to an active older adult community, or living in a neighborhood with multiple housing options (single and multifamily), retail shops, and other services.

You’ll also want to consider:

- Duration of your focus groups. Focus groups usually run one-and-a-half to two hours, but they could be longer or shorter.
- Number of participants; more people equals more time
- How many key topics you want to cover
- Complexity of the questions/topics
- Participants’ familiarity with the topics

RESOURCES FOR FOCUS GROUP FACILITATORS

If you have the budget, hiring an experienced focus group facilitator is ideal. Besides conducting the actual sessions, the facilitator can also help you recruit participants and develop your focus group questions. The following organizations maintain lists of individuals and organizations that specialize in focus groups and/or public opinion research. They also offer broader listings that are searchable by topic, geography, and other criteria.

Qualitative Research Consultant's Association

Maintains a searchable database of its members who specialize in focus groups and other qualitative research techniques. (Available at <http://www.qrca.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=54>.)

American Association for Public Opinion Research

Produces an annual "Blue Book Directory," which includes a list of organizations that provide focus group development and facilitation. (Available at http://www.aapor.org/Find_a_Researcher.htm.)

MuniLink (League of California Cities)

Features searchable listings of products and services geared toward meeting municipal needs. (Available at <http://www.cacities.org/munilink>.)

In addition, many colleges and universities have aging, research, and/or communications centers that may be able to help you develop an effective aging well focus group. If this type of resource is available locally, you may find it more affordable than private consulting companies. Planning committee members (particularly academic institutions and nonprofit organizations) may also have the in-house expertise needed to develop and conduct effective focus groups

During & After the Focus Groups

Every focus group session should have an agenda. A typical sequence of events for a two-hour focus group is outlined below.

- **Welcome**—Introduce the facilitator, note-taker, and participants, and thank everyone for attending. (5 minutes)
- **Overview**—Explain the purpose of your aging well planning process, how the focus group fits into the overall effort, and the specific topic(s) you will be covering. (5 minutes)
- **Process and ground rules**—Let participants know what to expect (flow of the meeting) and what is expected of them (one person speaks at a time, treat all comments/ideas with respect, no side conversations, everyone participates, etc.). (5 minutes)
- **Questions**—Ask an initial, easy question that will get everyone talking, then proceed through the prepared questions. Typically, facilitators ask more difficult questions in the middle of the focus group, rather than at the beginning or end. The facilitator should use neutral language and, as much as possible, avoid any responses that could signal desirable or undesirable responses. For example, verbal comments such as "yes," "good," or "interesting," or nonverbal signals, such as head-nodding, may cue participants that there is a "right" answer and inhibit participants from offering alternate views. Instead, use conversation extenders, such as, "Please tell me more about that," "Any other thoughts?" and "We haven't heard yet from you, Sam. What do you think?" (1.5 hours)
- **Responses**—Be sure everyone has a chance to contribute to the discussion and that all opinions on a topic are heard. Summarize what's been said and ask if anyone has anything else to add. Call on any participants who haven't spoken or who have spoken very little. (10 minutes)
- **Closing**—Ask for any final comments. Let participants know how the information will be used, that they will receive a copy of the focus group report, and what the next steps are in your aging well planning process. Thank participants for their contributions. (5 minutes)

FOCUS GROUP ON TRANSIT SERVICES FOR OLDER ADULTS

A public forum was held to discuss the future needs and opportunities for older adults in a relatively small city of 30,000 residents in the greater San José, California, metropolitan area. Out of this forum, two transit options emerged as high priorities: an in-town shuttle and improved bus service to downtown San José.

Here are sample questions for a focus group of 10 residents, who range in age from 50 to 65. The questions are aimed at deepening the city's understanding of how residents view these options.

1. How do you currently get around town for shopping and services?
2. For all the rest of the questions I'm going to ask you, I'd like you to look ahead 10 – 15 years and, as best you can, answer for yourself at that point in the future. Okay, let's try the first one. How do you see yourself getting to the doctor, grocery store, bank, park, and other local destinations 10 – 15 years from now? What about getting to the hospital, theater, stadium, mall, or other destinations in San José?
3. In our forum, many people recommended developing an in-town shuttle bus service. If such a service were available, where would you want it to take you?
4. Other communities with these types of shuttles generally charge \$1 – \$3 per trip. How much would you be willing to pay to use an in-town shuttle?
5. Would you be willing to pay extra for door-to-door service? By "door-to-door," I mean the shuttle would stop at your house and drop you off in front of your doctor's office or another location.
6. How far would you be willing to walk to get to a shuttle stop?
7. What are the most important factors that would encourage or discourage you from using an in-town shuttle?
8. In our forum, people also expressed a desire for bus transportation from our community to downtown San José for better shopping, recreation, and more services. What are the destinations in downtown San José that you would be interested in traveling to, if this service were established?
9. What would you be willing to pay for transportation to those destinations?
10. What are the most important factors that would encourage or discourage you from using bus transportation to key destinations in San José?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add about an in-town shuttle service for our community or bus transportation to San José?

Should you record your focus groups?

All focus groups should be recorded, either by audiotaping, videotaping, note-taking, or some combination of all three methods.

If you choose to audiotape and/or videotape the focus group, you'll need to inform participants in advance and obtain their consent in writing. Taping (by either method) is the most accurate, complete, and permanent way to document your focus group. Some participants may be inhibited by the presence of a camera or tape recorder, but generally this is not a significant problem. Tapes also allow staff to review the focus group directly, rather than sitting in and possibly inhibiting participants during the focus group itself. Keep in mind that you'll need to allow time for transcribing and interpreting an audiotape or videotape after the event.

Someone other than the facilitator should take detailed notes during the focus group, even if you're recording it. Never rely solely on an audio or video recorder; they can and do malfunction. Notes can also include observations of nonverbal responses or other important details.

What should you do with the focus group results?

Immediately after the session, check your audiotapes/videotapes for any gaps or breaks in the recording. If either occurred, review the written notes immediately and fill in details as needed to ensure that a complete record of the focus group exists.

As soon as possible (within hours of the focus group and always before the next session), make a transcript of the tape or a written summary from the notes and review it to determine trends, common themes, interpretations, and conclusions. The facilitator and assistant can

do this as a team, but at least one other person should review the results independently. You'll also want to analyze the session and determine whether you need to make any revisions to the questions, the environment, or any other aspect of your focus group before the next session. When all your focus group sessions are complete, compile a final report that includes a summary of participants' comments and opinions, quotes that highlight key themes, and any conclusions or interpretations you are able to draw from the results.

For more detailed information about analyzing focus group results, see:

- ["Using Focus Groups for Evaluation"](#) (Mary Marczak and Meg Sewell)
- ["Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group"](#) (Eliot & Associates)

If conducting focus groups is the last step in your aging well planning process, and you have not previously reported on other events, such as forums or surveys, you can include the focus group results in a comprehensive report to elected officials and key institutions involved in your effort. (For more information, see "Reporting & Using Your Results" in "Community Planning for Aging Well: An Overview.")

If there are more activities to come in your planning process, you should still share focus group results with your planning committee and focus group participants as soon as possible after the final focus group session. This reinforces the message of shared responsibility and joint leadership you've been cultivating with your partners, and strengthens their commitment to the process. It also helps participants see the value of their contribution to your effort and encourages them to stay involved.

If your focus group topics were related to a current hot issue in your community (e.g., planning a new transit system), the results may inform immediate decisions and prompt specific actions from elected officials or governing boards of partner agencies. If there isn't such an issue, consider using your focus group results to identify a few immediate actions that community agencies and local government can take. This will help build momentum and support for your aging well planning process over the long term.



CHECKLIST—DURING & AFTER YOUR AGING WELL FOCUS GROUPS

- Have we developed an agenda for our focus groups?
- Do we have an adequate plan, including backups, for documenting the content of our focus groups?
- Have we carefully reviewed the results of our focus groups, identified themes, and drawn appropriate conclusions?
- Have we identified the governing boards and elected officials who will receive a report on the results of our focus groups?
- Do we have a communications plan for sharing focus group results and ongoing aging well planning efforts and actions with focus group participants and the larger community?
- Have we identified some immediate actions to keep the momentum going?

RESOURCES

Essentials of Planning and Conducting Focus Groups & Toolkit for Conducting Focus Groups

OMNI Institute

These two publications provide detailed information about how to plan and execute effective focus groups, checklists for focus groups and facilitators, and sample forms. (Available at <http://www.omni.org/capacity.aspx>.)

Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group

Duke University, Office of Assessment

This guide contains sample questions, recruitment flyers, a sample consent form, and formats for data analysis and a synthesized report. It also includes several checklists. (Available at http://www.assessment.aas.duke.edu/documents/How_to_Conduct_a_Focus_Group.pdf.)

Conducting a Focus Group

Lehigh University

This guide provides a good overview of how to plan and conduct a focus group and how to interpret results. (Available at <http://www.cse.lehigh.edu/~glennb/mm/FocusGroups.htm>.)

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

This guide is part of [Aging Well in Communities: A Toolkit for Planning, Engagement & Action](http://www.civicpartnerships.org/docs/services/CHCC/aging-well.htm). This toolkit also includes a community planning overview; guides for resident surveys and public forums; case studies; and a list of aging-related resources. For the complete toolkit, visit <http://www.civicpartnerships.org/docs/services/CHCC/aging-well.htm>.



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