When to Use Focus Groups

Although we envision individual key informant interviews for the majority of community needs assessment (CNA) work, conducting one or more focus groups is an option as well. Focus groups are planned discussions to capture perceptions from a select group of people. As with interviews, focus groups are useful when you want to understand experiences, viewpoints and/or impressions. One disadvantage of focus groups is that the data can be challenging to analyze because they represent multiple voices instead of just one (Mertens, 2010). According to Donaldson and Franck (2016), focus groups are useful when:

- You need visual aids.
- You ask sensitive questions.
- You need a group to develop ideas.
- Interaction and "building on ideas" will provide useful information.
- One person shares and it triggers a memory for someone else.
- Time to collect information is limited.
- You ideally have at least one person to facilitate and one person to record.

If considering a focus group, ideal participation is made up of the following:

- Six to 10 people per group
- Those who would be comfortable with one another, but do not necessarily know one another
- Diversity in gender, race/ethnicity, residence and other areas to offer rich perspectives
- If asking about one specific topic-area, ensuring all are familiar with that topic.

For example, Larimer County Extension utilized a focus group to get information from recent participants in its Family Leadership Training Institute (FLTI) program. That focus group was an opportunity to get a lot of qualitative information from traditionally underrepresented individuals in CSUE programming and it provided a level of comfort for the participants that they may not have had in a personal interview.

If you want to bring groups larger than 10 together at one time for the sake of broad input and efficiency, you may want to create smaller subgroups of participants who have a similar association to the topic being discussed. As an illustration, if you are assessing infant and child nutrition, select participants who are all parents for one subgroup. Another subgroup might be all elected officials. In this way you can get a greater cross-section and potentially see patterns across the groups (Donaldson & Franck, 2016). Multiple focus groups can be facilitated at once with multiple facilitators and note takers.

A separate document contains a protocol and sample questions for focus groups. When the focus groups are completed, use the Secondary and Key Informant Data spreadsheet to enter key points. Because information received from focus groups can be more challenging to analyze and synthesize, you can employ these two tasks:

1. Identify common responses within each focus group; these are referred to as common themes.
2. Compare and contrast themes across the different focus groups.

You can fill out the spreadsheet for focus groups based on common responses. If your focus group was composed of multiple subgroups, consider using other rows to capture themes that were significantly stronger for one subgroup compared to others.