

Extension County Assessment Focus Group Facilitation Guide



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Hosting Community Assessment Focus Groups

Involving community members in a focus group is an effective way to engage people in discussion and the identification of community issues. This document provides guidance to Extension Agents to facilitate a focus group to assess community needs and priorities. These focus groups provide a structured, facilitated introduction of questions that promote the discussion of ideas in a small group setting.

Identifying Participants

Extension offices have their “usual participants” who frequent programs, take advantage of Extension Services, and volunteer within our Extension system. In addition, Extension consistently pursues outreach efforts to identify and connect with audiences who are not involved with Cooperative Extension.

For the Extension Community Assessment, it will be important to tap into the audiences that normally do not participate in Extension programming.

Each county should plan to conduct at least two focus group sessions. One with organizational representatives from groups not currently engaged in Extension projects, and one with individuals not typically engaged with Extension. Examples of these are below.

County Organizational Representatives:

Because the organizational involvement will vary by county across the state, there is no definitive list of who the “new audience” of organizational focus group representatives should be. Counties will need to determine organizations to engage. Generally, however, typical invitees will be representatives of areas of community organizations that might include:

- Local Government (City and/or County)
- Health (Programs, Hospitals, Major services)
- Economic Development (Industry, Business, or Area Foundation)
- Chamber of Commerce
- Main Street Program
- Area Development District
- Banking
- Workforce Investment Board
- Education (Primary and Secondary, Community college or University)
- Civic groups (Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, etc.)
- Non-Profits or Service programs (i.e. : United Way, CAP, or YMCA)
- Ministerial or Faith Community
- Agricultural groups
- Others identified by County Extension

Hosting a community
focus group can
gather important
information and serve
as a way to reach new
Extension audiences.

Individuals from Non-traditional Audiences:

Because Extension programming will vary by county across the state, there is not a definitive list of who the non-traditional focus group representatives should be. Generally, however, typical invitees will represent any audiences underserved by Extension programming. Examples may include:

- Racial or ethnic minorities
- Youth
- Seniors
- Economically poor neighborhoods
- Economically wealthy neighborhoods
- Geographic rural or urban areas that are not well represented in Extension programs participation
- Others identified by County Extension

Organizing the Community Assessment Focus Group

The focus group listening session with community members allows you to hear first-hand the needs of the community members. In addition, the focus group organizing process can invite people who have not had previous involvement with Extension to become involved.

Pre-event planning should include consideration of the time, date, and location of the event best for the audience. While it may be advantageous to get participants to the extension office, taking the session to the “non-traditional” audience may result in more participation. To maximize participation:

- Hold the meeting at a neutral location.
- Make sure the location is fully accessible. Arrange for transportation if necessary.
- Consider providing childcare or addressing other potential barriers to participation.

Anticipated Focus Group Outcomes:

- Gain a better understanding of the County’s pressing issues.
- Gain a better understanding of top issues across the state.
- Gain a better understanding of how Extension can support important community change.

Facilitating the Focus Group

Size of Group

A focus group typically involves 8 -12 people plus the facilitator and recorder. The dynamics of this size group allows the facilitator to engage everyone to participate, and often results in the sharing of a range of perspectives and responses. Focus groups larger than 12 can shift the small group dynamic and can be a greater challenge to engage people to participate in the conversation. Focus groups with fewer than 8 participants can also affect the power dynamics of the group and may result in fewer ideas generated.

Preparing for the Session

Prior to the session, set up an easel and flip chart paper to capture ideas. Another creative way of capturing all the information on one sheet is to post butcher paper on the wall as the focal point of the discussion. Organize chairs in the room so participants can see each other when they talk and the paper where things will be written. A half circle works best. The wall or flip chart will be a visual aid for writing participant responses and serve to document the conversation.

Facilitating the Focus Group

With any public gathering, it is best to start by introducing yourself. Share with the participants the anticipated outcomes of the focus group and the time allocated for the meeting. Invite the participants to introduce themselves and respond to the opening question. Try to establish a stress-free and open environment for the forum. The facilitation framework is included on the next page to guide your focus group conversation.

Facilitation tips to remember:

- Allow everyone to introduce themselves.
- Ask the focus group question and allow a silent pause for participants to respond.
- If no one responds, ask the question again. You can say things like, “Who would like to start?” or call on participants, “What are your thoughts on this [Joan]?”
- Seek clarification, but don’t evaluate their responses. Focus groups are NOT the time to evaluate or correct participants who are sharing their ideas.
- Listen and reflect the ideas of the participants – even if you disagree or if what is being said may be critical. Criticism is an opportunity for learning about what is and isn’t working. Focus groups are NOT intended to be an information session on what Extension does or a time to defend programs.

Recording tips to remember:

One agent should be the recorder of the focus group. The recorder captures the key ideas of each participant in response to the questions. Tips for Recording include:

- List the question at the top of the page.
- Number the pages and hang full pages in sequence for participants to see.
- Write large and legibly.
- Don’t identify the speaker in the recorded notes.
- Use the words of the participants as much as possible.
- Ask participants if what was written accurately states the idea or intent of the comment.

Closing the Focus Group

Before ending, give each participant 3 sticky dots numbered 1-3. Ask participants to place the dots on the issues that are the top 3 issues that should be addressed in the next 4 years to improve the county. Once completed, share that the results from this focus group will be combined with other data collected in the County to better understand the current issues and to inform the work of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension. Thank them and invite them to future programs through your Extension Office!

County Assessment Facilitation Guide

<u>Activity Description</u>	<u>Facilitation Guide and Questions</u>
<p>Opening comments: Summarize the intent of the meeting to gather perspectives and understand the needs of the county. Explain the answers will be recorded and how they will be used.</p>	<p>Detail ground rules and what to expect in the focus group. Describe the anticipated outcomes. (8 minutes)*</p>
<p>Introduction/Check-in: Allows participants to speak and establish equality of participation in the group. Recorder documents a bulleted list of responses</p>	<p>Participants introduce themselves and respond to this question: <i>Tell why you are proud to be from this county. (or) Share something you like most about living in this county.</i> (12 minutes)</p>
<p>Key questions: These questions are the heart of the focus group. They will likely be the first planned questions and will deserve thoughtful analysis. Note: Recorder documents responses. Create a list of pressing issues (question # 2) for prioritization in step 6.</p>	<p>As you think about our County:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>What is your vision for a more vibrant county?</i> (8 -10 minutes) 2. <i>Based on your experiences, what would you say are the most pressing issues for this county in the next four years?</i> <i>How do these issues affect you or your neighbors? What other quality of life aspects does this issue affect?</i> (20 minutes) 3. <i>Based on your experiences, what barriers prevent us from addressing these issues?</i> (8 minutes) 4. <i>What type of information or resources would help to address the issues?</i> (10 minutes)
<p>Closing questions: This is an opportunity to recap information raised in the focus group. Instruct participants that they are going to prioritize issues facing the county. Consolidate issue responses so you have a list of issues without duplication. Give each person 3 sticky dots numbered 1-3. Ask them to rank the top 3 long term issue priorities by placing their dots. Give participants a second color of dot. Ask them to place this dot on the issue they see as most important to address in the short term.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. <i>Given everything discussed, what final thoughts would you add on being a vibrant county?</i> <i>Have we left anything out?</i> (2 minutes) <p>Prioritization:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. <i>Using the numbered dots, identify what you believe are the top 3 long term issues that are most important to address in the next 4 years. With a second color of dot, indicate the issue that is most immediate to address right away.</i> (8 minutes) <p>Wrap up: Thank participants, ask if they would like a final report of findings, and invite them to future Extension events! (10 Minutes)</p>

*Times are approximate. Entire Focus group target time = 90 minutes.