

# Engaging Voices: A Community Driven Approach to Assessments

A Guide to Focus Groups for Sexual Assault  
Response Teams

by

Heather Blanton & Madeline Gonser

This resource was adapted from *Listening to Our Communities: A Guide for Focus Groups*, originally created by the National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center in 2014, and further customized with examples and information specifically relevant to Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs).



# Laying the Groundwork for Meaningful Conversations

Focus groups are a powerful tool for Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs) to gather in-depth feedback and insights from diverse perspectives. By facilitating open and guided discussions, SARTs can better understand the experiences and needs of:

- Victims/survivors
- Service providers
- Community members

This guide is designed to help SARTs effectively plan, conduct, and analyze focus groups. It walks through:

- Selecting participants
- Structuring sessions
- Interpreting results

Whether you're new to focus groups or refining your approach, this guide offers practical tips and promising practices to support trauma-informed, victim/survivor-centered engagement.

## What is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a type of assessment where a small group of individuals from a target audience gather to discuss a specific topic. These sessions are usually led by a facilitator who guides the conversation using a structured discussion format, allowing for open dialogue.

## Who Should Participate?

Participants should be carefully selected based on the focus of the group. Focus groups are most efficient when your participants have common experiences or background.

For example:

- If exploring law enforcement responses to sexual violence, include only law enforcement personnel.
- Conduct separate groups for prosecutors, advocates, or other professionals with tailored questions.

### Considerations for Victims/Survivors

When engaging victims and survivors, prioritize safety, emotional readiness, and supportive environments. Tailor your approach to honor their experiences and autonomy.

# Designing and Conducting Focus Groups

Facilitating trauma-informed focus groups begins long before participants enter the room. This section outlines key planning elements that support victim and survivor-centered engagement, from establishing clear objectives to coordinating timing and structure. Thoughtful preparation lays the foundation for safe, accessible dialogue, and ensures that every detail reflects a commitment to victim and survivor safety and autonomy.

## Centering Purpose and Direction

- **Purpose**
  - Define the primary goal of the focus group, emphasizing key topics and intended outcomes.
  - Ensure participants understand how their input will be used to drive actionable insights.
- **Objectives**
  - Clarify specific objectives to keep discussions focused and purposeful.
  - Consider including these objectives in the participant application to ensure transparency and alignment.

## Scheduling

- **Date and Time**
  - Offer multiple options to accommodate participants' availability. Avoid early mornings or late afternoons when participants may be rushed or fatigued.
  - Check for holidays or community events that may affect attendance.
- **Duration**
  - Sessions should last between 45-90 minutes. If longer than 90 minutes, include breaks to allow participants to rest and refresh.
- **Number of Focus Groups**
  - Conduct 3-5 sessions to identify patterns and themes. If your audience is diverse, consider additional sessions for sub-groups.

## Considerations for Virtual Platforms

- Provide interpreters or translated materials as needed.
- Use platforms with features like closed captioning, breakout rooms, and screen sharing.
- Allow participants to join with audio only or change their display name for privacy.
- Share simple join instructions, encourage pre-session tech checks, and have support staff ready to assist.

## Venue and Focus Group Setup

- **Location**
  - Select a calm, distraction-free space such as a community center or neutral venue.
- **Directions and Accessibility**
  - Provide clear directions, parking info, and public transit options. Ensure the venue is ADA-compliant and accessible to all.
  - Consider:
    - Parking and public transportation
    - ASL interpreters or translators
    - Physical accessibility (e.g., ramps, elevators)
- **Room Setup**
  - Arrange chairs in a circle or around a table to encourage open discussion.
  - Ensure the space is calm, quiet, and welcoming.

### Considerations for Victims/Survivors

- Choose discreet, secure venues not affiliated with intimidating institutions.
- Offer free childcare to reduce participation barriers.
- Create a welcoming environment that honors individual preferences and boundaries.

## Materials and Necessary Documentation

Before diving into specific tools and documentation, it's essential to understand what supports effective implementation. This section serves as a foundation to ensure that facilitators, stakeholders, and participants have access to the key resources needed for smooth preparation and trauma-informed engagement.

### Discussion Guide

Prepare a structured discussion guide in advance to keep conversations focused and purposeful. This helps facilitators stay on track and ensures consistency across sessions.

For additional guidance, see [Appendix A: Sample Focus Group Outline \(Victim/Survivor-Centered\)](#) for a recommended structure and approach.

## Consent Forms

Consent is foundational to trauma-informed, victim/survivor-centered engagement. Before initiating any focus group, ensure participants understand their rights, the purpose of the group, and how their information will be used.

- **Before Participation**

- Clearly explain the purpose and goals of the focus group.
- Emphasize that participation is voluntary and participants can withdraw at anytime.
- Outline potential risks (even if minimal) and how they'll be addressed.
- Invite questions and offer space for clarification before signing.

- **Recording and Use of Information**

- Specify whether audio or video recording will occur and how recordings will be used.
- Let participants know they can opt out of being recorded while still contributing. Please see, [Supporting Participation Without Recording](#).
- Share how notes, transcripts, and recordings will be stored, accessed, and used.

## Accessibility Tips

- Use a flexible agenda instead of a rigid guide to allow for organic, healing conversations.
- Provide the agenda in advance so participants know what to expect.
- Be prepared to adapt based on participants' emotional readiness and comfort.

**Tip:** A promising practice is to retain information only as long as needed to fulfill its intended purpose, such as supporting evaluation, reporting, or systems change. Typical retention is 6 months to 1 year. Some funders may require longer retention for evaluation or compliance. Make sure to always review grant-specific guidance.

- **Supporting the Consent Process**

- Allow time for participants to read and reflect on the form.
- Ensure a staff member is available to walk through the form, if requested.
- Provide the consent form in the participant's preferred language, whenever possible, and offer interpretation support if needed.
- Offer copies of the signed form for personal reference.
- Retain signed consent forms, focus group notes, transcripts, and recordings securely for 6 months to 1 year, or as specified by applicable grant requirements.

## Confidentiality in Group Settings

In group formats like focus groups or listening sessions, confidentiality is inherently limited. While participants are encouraged to respect one another's privacy, it's important to acknowledge that shared information may not remain confidential.

- **To support transparency, consider including language like:**
  - “Your identity will be known to other focus group participants. While all participants are asked to keep comments confidential, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.” Let participants know they can opt out of being recorded while still contributing.
- **You can reinforce this message by:**
  - Offering a verbal reminder at the start of the session.
  - Co-creating group norms or shared agreements that include confidentiality expectations.
  - Providing options for silent participation or written input to honor varying comfort levels.

For more information on informed consent forms, see [Informed Consent Template for Participation in SART-Led Evaluations Involving Victims/Survivors](#).

## Recording Focus Groups

Recording focus groups can offer valuable insights, but it must be approached with care and transparency. The following guidance centers victim/survivor autonomy and ethical practice.

- **Before the Session**
  - Notify participants ahead of time if the session will be recorded.
  - Explain the purpose of recording and what will be captured (e.g. audio only or both audio and video).
- **Consent and Transparency**
  - Ensure the consent form clearly outlines recording details, data usage, and storage protocols.
  - Reinforce that participation is voluntary and opting out of recording does not exclude someone from contributing.

## Supporting Participation Without Recording

If a participant wishes to not be recorded, their voice still matters. Here are respectful ways to include their insights:

- Offer sticky notes, index cards, or feedback form for written input.
- Create space for participants to share during non-recorded portions or breaks.
- Encourage follow up emails or messages to capture additional thoughts.
- Even quiet participation shapes the group dynamic and supports collective learning.

## Participants

Thoughtful planning helps ensure focus groups are manageable and engaging for all participants. The following guidance outlines promising practices for group size and compensation, especially when working with victims/survivors.

### Group Size

- For groups with service providers or community members, aim for 6 - 10 participants to support diverse perspectives while allowing space to contribute.
- For groups with victims/survivors, consider inviting 8 –12 participants, anticipating that some may not attend due to last-minute needs or emotional readiness.

### Incentives/Compensation

- **Honor Time and Contributions**
  - Offer fair and equitable incentives that reflect participant's time, effort, and any personal costs (i.e. travel, missed work). Use federal mileage and hourly rates as a guide, adjusting based on your SART team's resources.
- **Use of Allowable Grant Funding**
  - Incentives may be provided through allowable grant funding, including gift cards, stipends, meals, transportation, or reimbursements. Always confirm that incentives align with your specific grant's allowable cost categories.

### Considerations for Victims/Survivors

Provide support options such as transportation, meals, childcare, and accessible incentives like gift cards or grocery vouchers to help reduce barriers to participation.

- **Prior Approval Requirements**
  - Some incentives, especially those for professionals or higher-value items, may require prior written approval from grant administrators. Document the approval process and retain records for transparency and compliance.
- **Incentives for Professionals**
  - When professionals participate (i.e. law enforcement, advocates, healthcare providers), consider offering:
    - Continuing education credits
    - Professional development stipends
    - Recognition or certificates of participation
  - Ensure these incentives are non-coercive, align with organizational policies, and are allowable under grant terms.

## Facilitation

Effective facilitation sets the tone for a respectful and productive focus group experience. The following roles and strategies help ensure consistency, emotional safety, and meaningful engagement throughout the session.

### Facilitator/Moderator

- Select individuals skilled in trauma-informed care and experienced in creating respectful, welcoming spaces.
- Encourage balanced participation, navigate sensitive discussions, and recognize signs of distress.
- Offer grounding techniques (e.g., deep breathing, moments of silence) when needed.
- Maintain consistency in facilitators across sessions to foster trust and continuity.

### Assistant Moderator/Note-Taker

- Even when sessions are recorded, a note-taker provides valuable documentation of:
  - Key themes
  - Participant quotes
  - Non-verbal observations
- Use a structured note template to support later analysis.
- Establish a simple cue system between facilitator and note-taker to pause or clarify without disrupting flow.

### Trauma-Informed Facilitation Strategies

- Begin and end sessions with optional grounding practices (e.g., mindfulness, breathing exercises).

- Offer alternative participation methods such as writing or drawing for those who may not feel comfortable speaking.

## Guiding the Focus Group Conversation

Facilitating focus groups with victims and survivors requires care, intentionality, and grounding in trauma-informed principles. The following strategies help create a space that encourages meaningful dialogue while honoring emotional safety and individual choice.

### Engaging Introductions

- Start with a warm, inclusive welcome.
- Set a tone of respect and openness from the beginning.

### Summarize Responses

- After each question, briefly summarize what was shared and check for accuracy:
  - “So, what I’m hearing is...”
  - “Would it be safe to say...”
  - “My understanding is...”

### Exercise Flexibility

- Be open to unplanned but relevant directions in the conversation.
- Avoid unnecessary tangents that may derail the discussion.

### Who Isn’t Speaking

- After a few questions, gently invite quieter participants to share:
  - “Would anyone who hasn’t spoken yet like to add anything?”

### Provide Reflective Space

- Allow 5-second pauses after questions to give participants time to reflect and respond.

### Use Thoughtful Prompts

- “Can you share more about that?”
- “Could you give an example from your experience?”

### Neutral Reactions

- Keep feedback neutral and bias free.
  - “Thank you for sharing.”

## Ask Powerful, Open-Ended Questions

- Avoid yes/no questions. Instead, ask:
  - “What was helpful or not helpful about your experience?”

## Avoid Survey-Like Language

- Replace “How satisfied were you?” with “What worked well or didn’t work for you?”

## Open and Supportive Questioning

- Instead of “Why did you...?”, ask:
  - “What influenced your decision?”
  - “What factors shaped your experience?”

## Data Retention, Storage, and Data Deletion Plan

Secure and respectful data handling protects privacy and upholds ethical practice. Maintaining secure, ethical data practices is critical to supporting victim/survivor privacy, honoring informed consent, and meeting grant reporting obligations.

### Retention Timeline

Holding onto data for a set period supports thorough evaluating while honoring privacy commitments. The list below outlines promising practices to guide ethical retention.

- Retain all focus group data, including audio, video, and written documents, for a minimum of six months to one year.
- Review specific grant or contractual requirements, as some funders may require longer retention periods to support reporting and evaluation efforts.

### Data Storage Practices

Secure, limited-access storage protects sensitive information and ensures participant confidentiality. The following approaches represent promising practices for maintaining secure storage.

- **Secure Storage**
  - Transcripts and notes should be saved in encrypted digital files.
  - Avoid saving data on personal devices or cloud platforms without appropriate security protocols.
- **De-Identification**
  - Remove names and identifying details from transcripts.
  - Use participant numbers or generic labels (e.g., “Facilitator A”).

## Data Deletion Plan

Timely and permanent deletion reinforces trust and fulfills ethical obligations. The practices below offer promising strategies for responsible data deletion.

- Permanently delete all data once it's no longer needed.
- Ensure compliance with funder requirements before deletion.

For more information on data analysis, please see [Engaging Voices: A Community Driven Approach to Assessments A Guide to Data Analysis for Sexual Assault Response Teams](#).

## Follow Up

Gratitude reinforces connection. Post-session follow up helps reinforce transparency, respect, and accountability. Whether you're engaging participants directly or reflecting internally, these practices support ethical engagement and set the stage for future collaboration.

## Thank You and Acknowledgment

Acknowledging contributions strengthens trust and deepens connection.

- Send thank you emails to affirm participants' time and effort. This fosters goodwill, builds trust, and encourages continued engagement with SART initiatives.

## Share Findings

Transparency builds trust. Sharing results with both facilitators and participants demonstrates that their contributions are valued and impactful.

### Ways to Share Findings

- Create a written report with:
  - Key findings
  - Recommendations
  - Action steps
- Develop a resource shaped by participant feedback.
- Host a follow-up session where participants can:
  - Hear the findings
  - Ask questions
  - Offer clarifications or suggestions

## Internal Debrief Strategies

Thoughtful reflection ensures that focus group insights are accurately captured and ethically interpreted.

### After each session:

- Meet with facilitators and note takers to:
  - Review observations
  - Clarify key themes
  - Identify gaps or uncertainties
- Reflect on group dynamics
  - Participation flow
  - Emotional tone
  - Unexpected insights
- Discuss potential biases or assumptions.
- Adjust future sessions as needed to maintain consistency and responsiveness.

## Safety and Ethical Considerations

Ethical practice is the foundation of credible, respectful, and trauma-informed focus groups. No matter the type of evaluation being conducted, it's essential to prioritize safety and integrity throughout the process. Responsible, ethics-rooted facilitation not only protects participants, it also strengthens the validity and usefulness of the findings.

## Informed Consent

Before facilitating a focus group, confirm that participants are fully informed and supported in their decision to participate.

### Ask yourself:

- Have participants received clear, accessible information about the purpose and scope of the focus group?
- Do they understand how their information will be collected, stored, used, and shared?
- Have they been informed of their right to withdraw or decline to answer at any time?
- Are eligibility requirements (e.g., age, language, access needs) addressed with care?
- Is the consent process trauma-informed and respectful of autonomy?

## Confidentiality

Respecting confidentiality helps ensure a safe space for open, honest sharing. The practices below support that commitment.

- Clearly explain how confidentiality will be upheld before, during, and after the session.
- Avoid questions that could lead to disclosure of sensitive personal details.
- Store all notes, recordings, and reports securely and de-identified.
- Reinforce that insights will be shared in aggregate or anonymous formats, never attributed individually.

## Creating a Supportive Environment

The physical and emotional setting of a focus group plays a critical role in participant comfort and engagement.

### Private Setting

- Choose a room or location that limits external distractions and interruptions.
- Use neutral or community-based spaces that feel familiar and safe.
- Avoid locations tied to institutions that may feel intimidating or triggering.

### Onsite Support

- Ensure participants have access to support services during and after the session.
- Coordinate with advocates, mental health professionals, or crisis responders who can offer immediate or follow-up assistance.

## Honoring Autonomy

- Incorporate optional tools such as:
  - Anonymous surveys
  - Real-time polls
  - Written or visual feedback
- Reinforce that all forms of input, spoken, written, or visual, are valid and welcome.

## Continuing the Work Together

Focus groups provide a vital space for victim/survivor voices to guide meaningful systems change. When implemented with care and intention, they strengthen the effectiveness of Sexual Assault Response Teams by integrating trauma-informed, victim/survivor-centered practices across disciplines.

These discussions help identify service gaps, elevate victim/survivor expertise, and build more supportive responses. Facilitators and teams who prioritize transparency, emotional safety, and participant autonomy contribute to more ethical and impactful engagement.

## References

[Listening to Our Communities: Assessment Toolkit | National Sexual Violence Resource Center \(NSVRC\)](#)

For more information or guidance, please contact us at [svji@mncasa.org](mailto:svji@mncasa.org) or visit [www.mncasa.org](http://www.mncasa.org) for more on our victim/survivor-centered work with Sexual Assault Response Teams.

# Appendix A: Sample Focus Group Outline (Victim/Survivor - Centered)

This sample outline offers a customizable template for organizing focus group sessions. It includes key talking points, pacing cues, and trauma-informed framing to help guide meaningful conversation.

## Interview Script Outline

- Welcome, Introductions, and Thank Participants
- Review of the Purpose of the Focus Group
- Review of the Ground Rules
- Support Resources
- Compensation/Incentive
- Conversation
- Closing the Session
- Final Check-In
- Thank You and Next Steps

## Welcome, Introductions, and Thank Participants

Welcome! I'm (Insert name here), and I'm going to be facilitating our conversation today. Our Assistant Facilitator (insert name here) will be documenting our conversation. I want to begin by thanking you all for taking the time to join us today. We want you to know how much we appreciate your participation and that the information you share will be put to good use.

## Review of the Purpose of the Focus Group

As you know, we are here to learn more about your perceptions of sexual violence in the community and services available to address it. We are here representing the SART, which is made up of agencies involved in responding to sexual assault cases, including advocacy, prosecution, law enforcement, healthcare providers, and other community agencies.

Our hope is to deepen our understanding of how the community perceives sexual violence and the services available to address it. We're interested in your perceptions about what is working well, and what kinds of support and assistance might foster beneficial changes to addressing sexual violence.

As I mentioned before, (Insert AF Name) will be documenting our conversation, and diligently capturing the thoughts and opinions expressed today. We do this to aid our memory as we later try to recall and organize what you've shared with us. We want to accurately capture what you've said. To help us accurately capture the information shared, we will be recording this session. The recording will only be used for research purposes and will be kept confidential. Everyone should have received a consent form regarding the recording of today's session. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or wish for part of your comment not to be recorded, please let me know and I will pause the recording or omit that portion. You are also free to withdraw from the focus group at any time if you choose not to participate further.

Does anyone have any questions or concerns about the recording? If everyone is okay with the recording, I'd like to ask for your verbal consent to proceed.

By continuing in this session, you agree to participate in this focus group and give your consent for it to be recorded. Is everyone okay with moving forward?

### Review of the Ground Rules:

Before we begin, I'd like to set a few ground rules to make sure this is a safe and supportive space for everyone.

- There are no right or wrong answers. We are here to hear your honest thoughts.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- Speak at your own comfort level.
- Let others finish speaking before responding.
- Step out if you need to at any time.
- Use "I" statements and speak from your own experience.

Please feel free to answer only the questions you feel comfortable with. If you'd rather not respond to a question, that's completely okay.

### Support Resources

In addition, we do have advocates/counselors from the local domestic/sexual violence agency available if anyone feels they need support during or after the session. I will also provide resources at the end of the session in case you want to reach out later.

### Compensation/Incentive

As a small token of appreciation for your time and contribution today, we are offering [describe compensation i.e. \$50 gift card, a grocery store voucher, etc.]. We will distribute this at the end of the session. Your participation is valuable, and we want to ensure we honor

the time you've taken to be with us today.

Now that we have covered the logistics, let's begin. I would like to start by asking...

## Sample Questions

- Can you share any insights from your experience accessing support after experiencing sexual violence?
- What challenges did you face when seeking support services?
- How did community beliefs impact your experience?
- What changes would you like to see in how victims/survivors are supported?
- What has been most helpful in your healing process?
- If you could send one message to support providers, what would it be?

## Closing the Session

Thank you all so much for your bravery and openness today. I deeply appreciate the insights you've shared. Before we end, does anyone have any final thoughts or questions?

As a reminder, what was said here remains confidential. Please remember to respect the privacy of everyone in this room.

Before we conclude, I want to make sure everyone has access to the resources I mentioned earlier. Here is a list of local and national support organizations.

## Final Check-In

How is everyone feeling right now? If anyone needs to stay back for a moment or speak with someone privately, you are welcome to do so.

## Thank you and Next Steps

Thank you again for your time. Your contributions will help us make important improvements to services for victims/survivors. We'll be in touch if there are any follow-up steps, and you'll receive a summary of today's discussion, which will not include any personal details.

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