Conducting Key Stakeholder Interviews

This appendix provides information on how to conduct stakeholder interviews. A sample interview guide and summary sheet are also included. Note that the sample questions are generic in nature and should be adapted to the specific problem being targeted.

Pre-Interview Planning Process

Key stakeholder interviews involve identifying different members of your community who are especially knowledgeable about a topic (whom we call key stakeholders) and asking them questions about their experiences working or living within a community. It is typical to do 8–10 interviews and to seek out people with more than average knowledge to interview. These interviews are usually conducted face to face using either an outside interviewer specifically hired to conduct the interviews or a member (or members) of your organization. Group members with the needed skill set can be recruited to conduct the interviews (and can train other members, which will help sustain this skill among your group). The length of these interviews can vary and will depend on the number of questions you decide to ask.

There are several factors to consider when deciding who will conduct the interviews, for example:

- **Time**: Interviews will need to be scheduled, conducted, written up, and analyzed. Preparation and follow-up activities can easily take up to twice the time of the interview itself.
- **Skills**: The interviewer must possess specific skills, such as the capacity to listen well, the ability to write and take accurate notes, a good memory, comfort with meeting new people, attention to detail, and strong communication skills.
- **Consistency**: It is best to have one or two people conduct interviews so that knowledge and experience about how best to frame questions is built up. Also, a limited number of interviewers greatly facilitates identification of themes, since only one or two people have heard all the information.
- **Cultural competency**: Interviewers should be individuals whom key stakeholders can relate to. This could mean the interviewer shares attributes with the stakeholder (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, age) or that the interviewer is particularly familiar with the culture of the stakeholder.

The pre-interview planning process comprises three steps:

1. **Send a letter of introduction.** Once you have identified the key stakeholders in your community, send an official letter of introduction. The letter should include information about your coalition, provide background information on the substance misuse and abuse prevention initiative, briefly describe the needs assessment that is being conducted, describe how key stakeholders were identified, briefly highlight what sort of information you will request during the interview and how the information will be used, and inform them that they will be contacted by phone in the near future to set up the interview.
2. **Call to set up the interview.** After a reasonable amount of time has passed, call each key stakeholder to set up the interview. Introduce yourself and briefly review the information in your letter of introduction. Make an appointment to interview the stakeholder at a time and place that is convenient for him or her.
3. **Send the questions ahead of time.** Once the interview has been scheduled, send each key stakeholder a copy of the questions you plan to ask. This allows respondents adequate time to prepare their thoughts and to identify any relevant materials ahead of time.
Conducting the Interview

Begin by introducing your project and purpose. Remind the respondent about your purpose and the ultimate use of the information. Explain who will have access to your interview notes and whether the respondents will be identified in any reports or public discussions of your investigation.

Do not let the interview go much over an hour. The people you choose as key stakeholders are likely to be busy, and the quality of the conversation can deteriorate if they feel rushed. Many of your respondents may be people whom you will want to collaborate with in the future, so do not antagonize them by letting the interview go on too long.

Do not move to a new topic prematurely. Do not leave important issues hanging—you might run out of time before you can return to them. Also, you will get more useful information by discussing one subject at a time.

Do not get stuck on a question. Sometimes you just won’t get the information you want from a particular respondent. Know when to move on so you do not frustrate yourself or antagonize your respondent by trying to elicit information that he or she does not have, cannot articulate, or is not willing to share.

Use two interviewers. While not always feasible, it can be useful to have two people at the interview—one to conduct the interview and one to take detailed notes. Primary interviewers will still need to take their own notes to help with summarizing the information at the end of the interview, but knowing that their partner is taking more detailed notes allows them to pay more attention to the interview process itself.

Use active listening techniques. Pay close attention to what the key stakeholder is telling you. Follow up on anything that is unclear or that you do not understand.

Take notes. As described above, whether a single interviewer or a team of two conducts the interviews, it is essential to take detailed notes. Do not rely on your memory of the conversation after the fact.

Record the interview. If possible, do this in addition to taking formal notes. Recording allows you the opportunity to go back and clarify any points of confusion from your notes. If you choose to record the interviews, you need to obtain permission from the key stakeholder at the beginning of the interview, but knowing that their partner is taking more detailed notes allows them to pay more attention to the interview process itself.

End the interview by summarizing the key points. Summarizing what was said is a good way to end the interview. This step is important because it gives you an opportunity to put what the stakeholder said into your own words. This also allows the stakeholder to correct any mistakes or to emphasize key points that you may have overlooked.

Post-Interview
**Review your notes immediately after the interview.** This is the best time to clarify your notes and to add any additional information that was not possible to note during the interview, including information about the tenor of the interview, such as the degree to which the respondent was cooperative, how strongly he or she felt about issues discussed, and whether and why the interview may have been cut short. It’s also the best time to create a formal summary of the discussion based on your notes. As discussed above, analysis of the qualitative interview data should involve at least one other person who will rely on your notes.

**Follow up with a thank you.** Send a thank-you call or letter after each interview. This provides an additional opportunity to thank key stakeholders for their time and participation, and allows you a chance to follow up on any themes or pieces of information that were missed during the interview, or items that you found to be confusing when preparing your summary.

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**Key Stakeholder Interviewer Guide**

This guide is intended for the individual(s) conducting the key stakeholder interview and should not be distributed to the key stakeholders.

- Instructions to interviewers appear in brackets.
- All questions and probes should be answered (even if only by a “don’t know”). It is not necessary to continue with a probe if the respondent has already provided a response in his or her answer to the general question or to another probe.
- When selecting interview questions, keep in mind that open-ended questions are likely to elicit more thought and explanation, and therefore richer data, than closed-ended (“yes or no”) questions.
- Ask the questions/probes in the order shown.
- You may add questions, but do so only after Part VI. Be sure to ask the final question (“Do you have any other comments or observations you would like to make?”) before concluding the interview.
- Begin with introductions as needed.
- Explain that you will take notes and audio-record the interview. Discuss the respondent’s option of “going off the record.”
- Ask, “Do you have any questions about how the interview is going to work?” Answer all questions the respondent may have before proceeding to the questions below.

**Part I: Assessment of the Issue**

**Questions:** How would you describe the substance misuse and abuse situation in the community? How has the issue changed over time? Which groups are most affected? [Get specific information about age, gender, and race] What are the consequences? Where do the use and consequences occur? (i.e., during what specific days of the week or times)? What are the factors that drive the problem? One thing you will want to determine from your interviews is whether the specific groups of people or other factors stand out. Is there a particular impact on a group or subpopulation who may be vulnerable to health disparities?

**Probes:** What is the severity of the issue? Which groups are most affected? What are the consequences? When do the use and consequences occur? What are the factors that drive the problem?

**Note:**

**Part II: Steps to Address the Issue**

**Questions:** What has your organization done, if anything, to address substance misuse and abuse in the community? What do you think should be done to address substance misuse and abuse in the community?
**Probes:** How well have these efforts worked? Did you work with any other agencies or organizations in the community on this? [If so] Which organization(s), and how and how well did you work together?

**Part III: Readiness to Address the Issue**

**Question:** What is your assessment of the level of readiness within your agency or organization to address substance misuse and abuse in the community?

**Probes:** What is the level of interest in the issue? What is the level of willingness to address the issue? What factors would facilitate this work (e.g., what resources are available)? What factors might undermine or complicate this work?

**Question:** What is your assessment of the level of readiness in the community at large to address substance misuse and abuse?

**Probes:** Who are the leaders or champions of this issue? What is the level of interest in the issue? What is the level of willingness to address the issue? What factors would facilitate this work (e.g., what resources are available)? What factors might undermine or complicate this work?

**Question:** What impact, if any, has the misuse and abuse of substances in the community had on the functioning of your agency or organization?

**Probes:** How much of a burden has this placed on your agency or organization? How has it made your job harder? [Note that this information may be useful in recruiting the respondent’s support for your initiative]

**Part IV: Data on the Issue**

**Question:** What data are collected by your agency or organization, if any, that might help inform our assessment of substance misuse and abuse in the community or related factors?

**Probes:** How are the data collected? How often are the data collected? How recent are the data? Where are the current data gaps? Are there any problems with the data? How would we go about getting permission to access the data?

**Part V: Resources to Address the Issue**

**Questions:** What role, if any, would your agency or organization be willing to play in our efforts to reduce substance misuse and abuse in the community? What other individuals do you think we should talk to in order to obtain more information about substance misuse and abuse in the community?

**Probe:** Are there any other individuals in your agency or organization whom we should talk to?