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**PROTOCOL IN CONDUCTING A
CONSUMER FOCUS GROUP ON
MENTAL HEALTH NATIONAL
OUTCOME MEASURE
SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS**

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INTRODUCTION

This document is for the Pacific Jurisdictions to guide their planning process for a consumer focus group primarily to discuss the Social Connectedness National Outcome Measure (NOM). This focus group activity is in line with the current SAMHSA data initiative of improving the utility and cultural appropriateness of the national outcome measures to the Pacific Jurisdictions.

The intent of the focus group is to solicit consumer input on the definition of ‘Social Connectedness’ and the method of measurement. The objective is to examine whether the conceptual framework used to develop the Social Connectedness NOM and its current method of measurement adequately represent the culture within the Jurisdiction.

This document briefly covers all facets of conducting a focus group, from the planning stages to analyzing and reporting the results. It spells out the purpose of the focus group, lays out the questions, recommends note-taking methods, provides guidelines for reporting the results of the focus group, and identifies some of the basic logistical requirements of this activity.

Since this document is not a substitute for available handbook or manual in conducting Focus Groups, there is a list of references at the end of this document for additional reading.

PURPOSE AND QUESTIONS

The purpose of conducting a consumer focus group is to solicit feedback on (a) the meaning and (b) appropriate measurement of the Social Connectedness NOM.

A. Soliciting feedback on the **meaning** of Social Connectedness:

Start by asking the participants their thoughts, opinion, or idea of the word social connectedness from the viewpoint of a (positive) outcome of receiving mental health services. The expectation is for some of these viewpoints to converge toward the current working definition of social connectedness. Thus, in addition to asking their opinion on what it means to them, present the language currently in use and get their reaction.

Present the operational concept of social connectedness used in the Uniform Reporting System (URS), which is:

“a measure of the individual’s relationship with his/her family, friends, and community. This does not include relationship with service providers or the use of specific programs or social support services provided through the mental health system.”

You may also present the alternate definition of social connectedness recommended at the 2008 April Meeting of the Pacific Jurisdictions in Palau, which is:

“Social connectedness means participation in family, community, and/or customary systems and practices that support your optional health, mental health, wellness and abstinence. Examples include formal (AA/NA) or faith-based support (Bible study/church involvement), participation in family custom (customary obligations), social supportive activities that facilitate recovery, community customary activities, community outreach/service groups, and peer support.”

What to ask:

1. What does the word ‘social connectedness’ mean to you?

2. [Showing the above concepts], do any of these two definitions of social connectedness represent the meaning of social connectedness to you?
3. If the answer to #2 is 'No', ask how to modify the definition.
4. If the group recommends modifying the current concept, work on a new concept as a group. At the minimum, identify all aspects (any key words, elements, or concepts) that the group wants included in the definition.
5. In the case of children/youth, ask if this NOM should also apply to children, or only to their caregivers, or to both?

Note: URS definition applies only to caregivers. If the group decision is to develop a Social Connectedness measure for children, then allocate time to discuss a proposed definition/concept.

B. Soliciting feedback on the appropriate measurement of Social Connectedness:

If the group came up with a modified concept/definition of Social Connectedness, you can proceed with the discussion of the appropriate method of measurement.

There are two things you want to get feedback on:

- (a) type of indicator – should social connectedness be measured as a person's perception or should it be quantified in terms of the number of social groups the person is involved in or should it be the amount of time the person spent in any social group?; or are there any other indicators that should be considered?; and
- (b) method and frequency of collection – is it best to gather the information using a consumer survey or at the time of a consumer assessment? How frequent should this be measured – every month, every 6 months, once a year, etc.

 **W**hat to ask:

After recapitulating your discussion on the concept/definition of social connectedness, proceed to ask:

1. How should we measure a person's social connectedness?
Ask whether Social Connectedness is best measured by a person's perception of his/her social connectedness as currently reported in the URS, as follows:

URS NOM Description: Percentage of persons reporting positively about social connectedness

URS NOM Technical Specifications:

Numerator: Total number of persons reporting positively about social connectedness
Denominator: Total number of responses to the recommended Social Connectedness survey questions

OR should an alternate method be considered?

An example of an alternate method of measurement is by

- (a) reporting the number of social groups a person participates in
- (b) amount of time spent in any social group
- (c) others, specify.

2. What method of data collection should be used - through the consumer survey, at the time of assessment or service; and how frequent should the information be collected – once a month, quarterly, every 6 months, or once a year?

If the group agrees it should be measured as consumer perception, then present the current URS questions below and solicit feedback on the questions (**Note: discuss the Adult and Youth/Caregiver questions separately**).

The following are the adult questions on social connectedness (5 Likert scale of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree):

Please answer for relationships with persons other than your mental health provider:

- *I am happy with the friendships I have.*
- *I have people with whom I can do enjoyable things.*
- *I feel I belong in my community.*
- *In a crisis, I would have the support I need from family or friends.*

The following are the YSS-F questions on social connectedness (5 Likert Scale of strongly agree, agree, Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree):

Please answer for relationships with persons other than your child's mental health providers:

- *I know people who will listen and understand me when I need to talk.*
- *I have people that I am comfortable talking with about my child's problems.*
- *In a crisis, I would have the support I need from family or friends.*
- *I have people with whom I can do enjoyable things.*

NOTE: If the group recommends that Social Connectedness for children/youth is important and that it should also be measured, then allocate time to discuss proposed survey questions or list of social groups (if reporting the number of social groups is favored over consumer perception).

PLANNING THE FOCUS GROUP

The focus group may be conducted only once at a designated site or repeated multiple times either on the same or different sites depending on the resources available for this activity.

If there is only one focus group in a designated site, it is important that you ensure diverse representation of your focus group participants. Diversity in terms of population served (comprised of adult, youth, and family member or caregivers of children with mental health condition); geographic distribution; age; gender; and race/ethnicity.

Two focus groups conducted separately, one for adult consumers and the other for caregivers of children receiving mental health services, would be ideal. The nature of this NOM as applied to each type of population have some distinct differences that having separate focus group may provide adequate time for discussion and have better representation from each population group.

Consideration for multiple sites will depend on the geographic spread of the Jurisdiction.

What are the basic decisions the agency should make? Determine the resources committed to this activity. This will help you to decide on the design and size of the focus group, and whether to give an incentive (in the form of a stipend, transportation allowance, accommodation, per diem, or refreshments) or not. Then decide the location, date and time of the activity. Once you have determined the location, it is necessary to decide on how the room should be set up. The room arrangement is essential in the level of interaction you will generate from the discussion.

Once you have decided on the design of the focus group (one time or multiple times), you have to decide on how long the entire activity should be. Depending on the topics/questions to be covered, decide a reasonable timeframe (recommendation: no more than 3 hours or half a day). Make sure to include adequate time for breaks (recommendation: have a 5-10 minute break every hour).

How many to invite? Typically, the size of the focus group is kept to a manageable level of about 6-8 participants. If you are to conduct the focus group only once, consider increasing the number to ensure there is enough diversity and representation in the group. Invite more than the desired number of participants including an estimate for natural attrition (withdrawal) or no shows. However, the maximum number you will invite should still be within the manageable size in case everybody shows up.

What strategies to use? Use any tested communication strategies that effectively disseminate information. Advertisement, word of mouth, nominations, random

selection/invitation, bulletin boards, flyers, and other related media. Whatever communication media you choose, ensure that important information about the activity are provided: purpose of the focus group, venue, direction/map, date and time, incentives, contact information for questions and registration procedure. Allocate sufficient time to get the word out and finalize your list of participants.

What are the logistical requirements? The essential logistics are:

1. Pre-Focus Group:
 - a. Venue/room – reserve ahead of time
 - b. Moderator – identify the person and hold a pre-session meeting regarding the topic of the focus group, questions to ask, time allotment for each question, breaks, and the entire activity, importance of hearing the opinion of specific group/s among the participants, and the desired output.
 - c. Note taker(s) – determine how many note takers are needed (recommended: two) and identify the person/s. A pre-session meeting with note takers is also advisable. In addition to informing them of the purpose of the activity and the questions to ask, discuss with note takers how and what information to note.
 - d. Materials for the focus group, such as:
 - i. Agenda
 - ii. Copies of questions to ask
 - iii. Registration materials (gather basic information such as the participant’s demographic information: age, gender, race/ethnicity, relation to service recipient)
 - iv. Paperwork if giving incentives (discuss with your finance office what needs to be completed by participants to receive the incentive, for example W-2 forms)
2. Equipment:
 - a. Tape recorder (spare batteries and tapes) and/or computer and/or flip chart
 - b. Microphone (optional)/extension cord
 - c. Telephone (optional)
3. Others:
 - a. Refreshments or list of places to eat
 - b. Writing pad/pen/pencils/markers



To do checklist:

In order to ensure a stress-free focus group activity, develop a checklist of things to do and things you need. Go over each item and check them as you complete the task.

MODERATING THE FOCUS GROUP

Choosing the moderator is critical. The moderator should be able to carry on the discussion by engaging all participants. It is also important for the moderator to ensure that all questions are addressed (take note of instances when people are talking but not answering the question) and that adequate discussion time is given to each item.

Most importantly, if there is only one focus group, the moderator should carefully allocate discussion time to ensure each question is asked from different perspectives: (1) adult consumer perspective; and (2) caregiver perspective; and/or (3) children/youth perspective.

On the day of the focus group, allocate time to perform essential administrative functions such as collecting pertinent information about the participants, explaining requirements for the stipends or other allowances, and informing participants of any intent to record the proceedings of the focus group. Allow people to opt out if necessary.

Before you start the discussion, provide a brief background about the activity:

1. For a broader perspective, discuss the consumer survey that you periodically administer (hand out a copy of the survey or your current survey report)
2. Introduce the purpose of the focus group and what you intend to get out of the meeting
3. Discuss the mechanics (ground rules) of the focus group (recommendation: when discussing each question, distribute a written copy of the question. Also, give each participant a writing pad and pen in case they want to write down their thoughts)
4. Inform the participants on how results will be reported (i.e. no personal information will be provided), to whom it will be submitted, and if interested to know the results, give your contact information.

Mechanics of the focus group: Discuss with the moderator how to allocate the time for the focus group, discussion time for each question, and the frequency and appropriate amount of time for breaks.

It is beneficial to record the focus group for future reference. Since focus group is a qualitative form of data gathering, a transcript of the discussion would be useful when reporting the results. The transcript will help identify common themes in the discussion, specific words used, and help you recollect the discussion for later days.

If you are not recording the session, it is highly recommended that you assign more than one note taker. Note takers should be attentive to all concerns, questions, comments, suggestions, and pay particular attention to specific words used. Make sure the note takers sit in strategic locations with unobstructed view and hearing of all participants.

Note the non-verbal activity such as head nods, physical excitement, clues indicating agreement or disagreements. Unless asked by the moderator, note takers are not to participate in the discussion. Each note taker will have his/her independent notes that will be integrated into one document for used in the analysis.

Recapitulate thing agreed upon and/or discussed on a periodic basis; particularly before moving to a new topic. You may use a flip chart to write down key words or create a 'parking lot' questions or issues that you want to set aside for later discussion.

At the end of the meeting, it is advisable for the note takers, the organizer, and the moderator to debrief. This will help resolve any differences in notes or misunderstandings. Record this debriefing, if possible. If not, take notes.



T ips for moderating focus group

(Source: Krueger and Casey)

- Keep questions clear
- Be alert: Are they answering the questions
- Serve quiet food
- Think past (what has already been discussed), present (what is currently being said) and future (what still needs to be covered)
- Pace the questions and monitor the clock
- Anticipate running out of time
- Be ready for the unexpected
 - When nobody shows up
 - Only a few attend
 - The meeting place is inadequate
 - Participants bring children
 - Participants bring other adults
 - Other uninvited people show up
 - The group doesn't want to talk
 - The group gets so involved that the members don't want to live

DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

Submit a focus group report that provides a separate analysis for Adult Social Connectedness and for Children Consumer and/or Caregiver Social Connectedness (whichever the group decides). If there are two separate focus groups, one for adult consumers and the other for children/youth caregivers, the report simply contains the analysis of each of the focus group. However, if there is only one focus group for both populations, make sure the report presents separate analysis for each population.

Provide a background on the focus group: design used (how many focus groups), date of the meeting, venues, times, who were present, whether incentives were provided, general description of the mechanics used (were computers used, was it recorded, were there note takers, were food provided, etc.), copy of the agenda, and demographics of the participants.

When reporting the results of the focus group, use the primary questions as the reporting item.

A. Soliciting feedback on the **meaning** of Social Connectedness:

1. **Definition:** If the group came up with a recommended language for defining social connectedness, please *submit the proposed definition*.

If the group was not able to provide a language for defining Social Connectedness but discussed the elements or key words that should be explicitly stated in the definition, provide a *list of proposed key words, concepts, or elements of the definition*.

The list of key words, elements or concepts may also be taken from each participant's statement of what Social Connectedness means to them.

2. **Feedback on existing Social Connectedness definition:** using key words or short phrases, report the feedback to the (a) URS definition of Social Connectedness and (b) proposed definition at the Palau meeting.

Under each definition above, sort feedback into:

- what they like about the definition (positive comments)
- what they did not like about the definition (negative comments)

3. **Children's Social Connectedness:** tally the number who said that social connectedness should be measured for:
 - a. Children/youth receiving services

- b. Caregivers
- c. Both

B. Soliciting feedback on the **appropriate measurement** of Social Connectedness:

1. **How do we measure Social Connectedness as an outcome?** If the group has a unanimous or consensus recommendation, state the proposed measure.

If the participants asked of their preference, tally the responses and give the number for each suggestion. For example:

- a. # who said it should be a consumer perception
 - b. # who said it should be a count of social groups/organizations a person is involved in
 - c. # who said it should be the amount of time spent in a social group (state the amount of time)
 - d. Others, specify
2. **What type of data collection method to use?** If the group has a unanimous or consensus recommendation, state the proposed method.

If the participants asked of their preference, tally the number of people who expressed preference:

- a. Use of consumer survey
 - b. At the time of assessment or service
 - c. Others, specify
3. **How frequent should the information be collected?** If the group has a unanimous or consensus recommendation, state the proposed frequency of measurement.

If the participants asked of their preference, tally the number of people who expressed preference:

- a. once a month
 - b. quarterly
 - c. every 6 months
 - d. once a year
 - e. others, specify
4. **Feedback on current questions in the consumer survey (for adults):** If the group's opinion tends toward measuring consumer perception through the consumer survey, then present the current questions for discussion.

Report the feedback from the group on each of the following:

- (a) Are the questions adequate? If not, what is missing?
- (b) Report if they provide a language for additional survey questions.
- (c) Should the questions need modification? (list all suggested language if the group did not have a consensus)

5. **Feedback on current questions in the consumer survey (for caregivers):** If the group's opinion tends toward measuring consumer perception through the consumer survey, then present the current questions for discussion.

Report the feedback from the group on each of the following:

- (d) Are the questions adequate? If not, what is missing?
- (e) Report if they provide a language for additional survey questions.
- (f) Should the questions need modification? (list all suggested language if the group did not have a consensus)

6. **Feedback on measuring Social Connectedness for children:** Report the group's opinion. If they recommend survey questions that apply for children, report them as well.
7. **Other topics or issues.** List all other suggestions, comments, or questions. Use a thematic analysis (sort by themes) in reporting the results.



Basis for analysis (Krueger and Casey)

Depending on the method used in data collection, the basis of your report may come from any or all of the following sources:

- Transcript of the focus groups (written transcript of the recording)
- Tape-based (based on listening to a tape recording of the focus group)
- Note based
- Memory based
- Flip charts

Since focus group is a qualitative method of data collection, analysis made be conducted either by:

- Thematic analysis – using themes to group concepts or words used
- Tallying – counting the number of times key words or concepts were mentioned
- Identifying key words or use of short but effective phrases

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