

## **GENERAL SURVEY TRAINING**

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q. What is the goal of a survey?**

**A.** The goal of a survey is to produce valid and reliable results that accurately reflect the demographics and situations of respondents.

**Q. Why is training so important?**

**A.** Trained interviewers increase the validity and reliability of survey results. Therefore, it is essential that everyone involved with a survey be properly trained.

**Q. Who needs to be trained?**

**A.** Everyone involved in the project should be trained on the survey instrument.

**Q. Why is it important for respondents to participate?**

**A.** Homeless people won't be counted unless they participate in the survey! This information will help agencies identify the unmet needs of their homeless clients, raise awareness about the number of homeless and the problems they face, and successfully acquire funding for programs serving the homeless.

**Q. Are there advantages to using trained interviewers instead of having respondents take the survey by themselves?**

**A. Yes.**

**Why?** There are many advantages to conducting interviews instead of having respondents self-administer (complete the survey by him/herself) surveys.

- Interviews are better than self-administered surveys for dealing with complicated issues and for asking complex or confusing questions.
- Respondents may have difficulty reading or understanding a written survey. The respondent's interaction with the interviewer permits clarification of questions when respondents do not understand them, thus enhancing the accuracy of response.
- The interviewer can establish rapport with the person being interviewed. This may increase the number of completed surveys, and the higher the response, the more confident we are that results are representative of all homeless persons.

**Q. Should I read the survey beforehand?**

**A. Yes.** You should be comfortable with the instrument and understand the information being elicited by all of the questions, so that you are prepared to answer questions from interviewers, other volunteers/staff and respondents.

**Q. Will interviewers be specially trained?**

**A. Yes.** Interviewers will be trained in general interviewing techniques and on the specific instrument they will be using.

**Q. What are the most important things to do first?**

**A. 1) Read the survey aloud** until you are comfortable with the instrument, understand the information being elicited by all of the questions, are familiar with the responses to questions, and are able to read all the questions easily and smoothly.  
**2) Learn how to listen to responses and to record answers correctly.**  
**3) Learn how to review each survey immediately after completing it to verify that all items are complete, correct and legible. This is critical after completing an interview. It is even more critical if someone self-administers the survey that you quickly review the survey for completeness and, if possible, consistency, while the person is present.**

**Q. Can I rephrase questions?**

**A. NO! You should read questions exactly as they are written.**

**Why?** Rewording questions can introduce bias. You may want to reword a question to fit your own perception of what the respondent is capable of understanding or to spare the respondent embarrassment. However, substituting words changes the meaning of a question.

The words and phrases used in each question have been carefully selected, and are intended to define the context within which a respondent answers a given question. These words or phrases may specify periods of time, places, the frequency of events, and/or how we want respondents to think about an answer.

**Q. What if the respondent doesn't understand the question?**

**A. You may reread the question and, if necessary, explain** what information the question is trying to elicit in order to help the respondent understand how he should answer. **But** you should never prompt or encourage respondents to give any particular answer, and you should never act as if some responses are more or less appropriate or acceptable.

**Q. What if the respondent only answers part of the question or gives an inappropriate answer?**

**A. You cannot always get a clear or appropriate response.** If the respondent does not answer the question you have asked, gives an answer that is too vague or general to fit one of the response categories, or responds with irrelevant or incomplete information, **there are several things you can try.**

- If a respondent responds improperly to a question, reread the question so he can hear the words and phrases that define the conditions.
- If a respondent strays from the subject or gives answers that are not really relevant to the question, reread the entire question, emphasizing the key words.

**Q. What if the respondent cannot answer the question?**

**A. You can “probe” for information if a respondent is unable to answer a question.**

If a respondent cannot answer a question, it is extremely important that you explain what information is needed without creating bias, and try to get at least some response. Some respondents may not hear the entire question, and others may not understand it. In these cases, it is your job to provide an appropriate prompt or probe that elicits a complete and accurate answer. ***When in doubt, ask for more information and record it verbatim on the survey, being sure to use nondirective probes that don’t bias the respondent’s answer. When data are being analyzed, we can go back to the details and attempt to determine, e.g., in what county respondent spent the night.***

Examples of “neutral” probes are:

- You can ask for more information by saying things like “Can you tell me something more about that?” or “I need some details about that.”
- Respondents sometimes have trouble remembering dates or periods of time. You can help respondents remember by asking whether they can associate an event with a holiday or with any other event, or by associating it with the people or place they were at the time.
- Sometimes respondents are unsure of an answer or can’t remember the question; other times they don’t want to take the time to think about an answer. Don’t respond to these problems by suggesting answers! Never guess at what the respondent means! Instead, reread the question and use a neutral probe, so that the respondent will give an answer that applies to the question. For example, in survey Question 10, if someone does not know where he or she spent last night, you should re-read all the options slowly and clearly. Give the respondent some time to think about last night – who he was with, what he did, etc.
- If someone doesn’t know in what county he spent last night, then ask the respondent for any details he can provide, for example, that he slept outdoors under a bridge by a major highway, and that he had to walk for 20 minutes to get to the agency where he is being interviewed.

**Q. Do respondents have to answer all the questions?**

**A. You should strongly encourage respondents to answer all questions!**

These questions have been carefully selected. While all questions are important, it is most critical that respondents answer questions 1 through 19 and question 21. Without these responses, we may not be able to determine if someone is homeless. **However, INCOMPLETE SURVEYS SHOULD BE KEPT AND INCLUDED IN THE PACKAGE EACH SITE SENDS TO THE STATE TO AVOID AN UNDERCOUNT. THE HOMELESS COUNT WILL BE BASED ON RETURNED SURVEYS!**

**Q. How do I keep respondents focused?**

**A. It is likely that respondents will go off topic.** Respondents typically go off topic by going into detail about their situation and the problems they are facing. In order to complete the interview and be able to move on to the next person, you need to have a strategy for helping the respondent focus on the survey questions.

- Example: First, acknowledge what the respondent has said and let them know that their concerns are valid by saying something like “I’m sorry to hear that” or “It sounds like you have had a lot of trouble with [what they just told you]”. (*Don’t get involved in a discussion; just let them know that you heard what they said!*) Then, redirect the respondent by repeating the question and continuing with the survey. If that doesn’t work, remind them of the purpose of the survey, which is to make sure that as many homeless persons as possible are counted. You can say, “So that we can count everyone who needs services, we need to continue with the survey.”

**Q. How do I remain objective and professional?**

**A.** You will likely be compassionate and concerned about the homeless and this project. You need to acknowledge to the respondents that you have heard what they said (see above), and then move on and complete the survey. This isn’t the place for counseling. Your job is to get the information we need so that the state can help people. You will do the most good by completing as many quality surveys as possible.

Every volunteer will have a list of local agencies that provide services to the homeless. Volunteers can give out these resources to homeless persons. This is a way volunteers can offer help without taking time away from the survey process.