

COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

Community Interviews are formal information gathering sessions. Typically, they are one-on-one interviews conducted in the citizen's home or office; occasionally, however, phone interviews or Focus Groups may also be appropriate. Community Interviews are a tool to use to help you construct another, more useful tool, a Public Participation Plan. Community Interviews allow you to gather information about the site's community and to learn what information the community wants from permit applicants and/or permitting agencies. Community interviews also can yield information valuable to the site team and establish a positive relationship with the community.

Required Activity?

No. More detailed information on community interviews and other public participation activities for use at various stages of the RCRA process can be found in Chapter 5 of the [2016 Edition of the RCRA Public Participation Manual](#).

Making It Work

When to Use

During permitting actions, interviews could take place many times during the permitting process, including during the pre-permit application stage, permit review, preparation of the draft permit, and permit modification review.

During corrective actions, interviews could take place during the Corrective Action process, including the RCRA Facility Investigation (RFI), Interim Actions, proposed remedy, and completion of remedy. When updating the **Public Participation Plan**, interviews should be done far enough in advance to enable you to complete the plan before any deadline. Interviews should not be scheduled during certain times of the year, such as national or religious holidays.

Know when special events occur in your community. Without competing with the event, perhaps you can participate or have a table there so that people can talk with you. For example, avoid the week of April 15 (taxes), holidays, etc.

How to Use

Try to know as much as possible about the area. Demographic information is valuable. Use [LandView](#) to understand community demographics before you arrive. Use your regional Geographic Information Systems (GIS) specialist who may provide Environmental Justice analysis maps. Check the GIS capabilities of your local regulatory agency. Other online databases such as Envirofacts, Surf Your Watershed, and the **Department of Housing and Urban Development's** database maps may be useful. Before you begin planning, know from which groups you want to draw your sample of interviewees. Make sure you include all segments of the community.

Interviews should be conducted personally; bring a contractor to take notes, if necessary. If you have limited resources but need to do more interviews, consider using focus groups to supplement the initial 3-15 interviews. In this way, you can easily get data from additional citizens without significantly impacting your resources.

Who

Consider the role of the permit applicant, permitting agency, and the public, including local officials, community residents, public interest groups, and other interested or affected parties.

When

Depending on the size of the sample, plan on at least one to three days to complete the interviews. Allow an hour for each interview, plus travel time between appointments, time to review each session, time for meals, etc. Set your schedule, then call everybody on the list to make the appointments two weeks before your trip (see sample call in this section). A contractor, if available, can make these calls. Do interviews in people's homes unless they express another preference.

How

Interviews should be limited to the individual and perhaps other members of the immediate household. If others come, ask if you can schedule a time just for them.

It is critical to your success that you are on time. Dress professionally with cognizance of community standards. Expensive suits are wrong for rural, agricultural communities, but so are bib-overalls and work boots. Some people will dress up for a visit by a federal official, and may view your casual attire as disrespectful. Be mentally prepared for anything. You never know what you will walk into. Try to avoid forming pre-conceptions of the people, the neighborhood, or the homes. Hazardous waste is alien concepts to the average person and may seem frightening. The permit applicant and/or permitting agency is not always seen as the good guy by the general public.

Spend at least five minutes to establish a relaxed atmosphere, and if you can genuinely give a compliment or find a common interest then do so. Never give an idle compliment. Smile and maintain eye contact.

Consider **Cross-Cultural** issues. Examine the cultural behavioral expectations of the community and the interviewee, and modify your behavior accordingly. Often, we think we hear and comprehend an answer, but it is very possible that you have misinterpreted the interviewee's response. Restating the answer helps to ensure that you heard it correctly, and shows the interviewee that you are truly interested in understanding the comment/concern.

Be aware of your body language. Try to maintain open and friendly body language, no matter what is said or occurs during the interview. Sitting back, slumping, folding your arms across your chest all may convey lack of interest or a closed mind.

Mirror the attitude of your interviewee. This is one of the best methods you can use to put your interviewee at ease. If the individual is extremely formal and proper, you also should be. If the interviewee is very open, friendly and casual, then follow that tone. Remain impartial, never be defensive. You are not there to justify, defend, or explain the permitting agency's position. As hard as this may be, it is imperative that you remember your goal is to gather information about the site and the community.

Be flexible. Interviews are dynamic. Know what information you need (see accompanying list), but be prepared to respond to the situation of the moment. A planned interview is important, but you must be able to move around the agenda with the person's responses.

Assure anonymity. Many residents fear retribution for talking with permitting agencies. Tell your interviewees that the information they provide will be combined with all of the other interviews and will be made public; but also tell them that the information will not be attributed to any individual.

Personal information obtained for or during interviews is strictly confidential. Names, addresses, or phone numbers of private citizens consulted during the community interviews should not appear in the plan. There should be no way to attribute any information or comments to any private citizen. Local officials, interviewed in their official capacity, should be identified in the list of contacts, and their comments may be attributed. This is also true for representatives of the

potentially responsible parties interviewed in their official capacity. Leaders of civic clubs, local businesses, or public interest groups are private citizens and should not be identified.

After the interviews, review each session with those who assisted you. Review sessions as soon as possible, but not in front of the next person's house. Upon returning from the community, meet with the contractor or staff to discuss the overall "feel" of the interviews. If available, have the contractor prepare a summary. Then reconvene the contractor regarding the **Public Participation Plan** (e.g., issues to address, draft deadline, etc.) Send thank you notes.

Tips

- Consider using **Focus Groups** rather than interviews for information needs that arise after the **Public Participation Plan** has been drafted.
- If available, use contractor support to take notes, clarify issues, make sure nothing is missed, and prepare written summaries. Note that contractor names and contact information may be protected by the Federal Privacy Act and exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).
- Do not use a recording device.
- Be on time.
- Be prepared by knowing:
 - what information you need,
 - what questions you plan to use to get it and what you plan to do with it,
 - something about the interviewee, and
 - as much as possible about the site and the community.
- Be aware of past interactions the community had with the permit applicant and/or permitting agency and be prepared for venting.
- Be flexible.
- Use as large a sample of interviewees as possible because:
 - more data means better information;
 - better information means a better **Public Participation Plan**;
- Assure anonymity.
- Manage the interview, keeping it focused and moving.
- When finished, thank the interviewee and graciously exit.
- Send thank you note.

Related Tools/Resources

Attached Items Within this Tool

- Attachment 1: Target Identification and Considerations
- Attachment 2: Planning/Implementation Checklist
- Attachment 3: Sample Scheduling Call
- Attachment 4: Sample Confirming Letter
- Attachment 5: Information Needed from Interview

Attachment 1: Target Identification and Definitions

Interviews should include:

- All residents contiguous to the site
- All residents within known paths of migration
- Local officials—mayor, supervisors/council members, police chief, fire chief, solicitor
- Civic leaders—presidents of service and civic clubs (e.g., Kiwanis, Rotary), Chamber of Commerce officers, PTA officers, principals, teachers, clergy (works best as a group)
- Representatives of public interest groups
- People that repeatedly show up in response to the question: “who else should we be talking to?”

Considerations regarding the target audience:

- In order to develop an excellent Public Participation Plan, consider doing more than 25 interviews when:
 - A facility is complex,
 - A permit application/modification is controversial, or
 - The affected community is large, or there are multiple communities.
- If you have the resources, it might be beneficial to:
 - Structure your interviews in concentric geographic circles to see if concerns differ farther from the site, by direction from the site, or from rural to urban
- Use a map of the site and its surrounding areas to:
 - Target the Public Participation Plan and subsequent activities, and
 - Provide a visual reference of especially contentious areas, to see if you can distinguish a pattern.
- When conducting interviews, bring a site/area map to help interviewees understand the site’s location in relationship to them.
- Know your community and consider their special needs, such as:
 - Arrange to bring along a foreign language interpreter, if necessary, or
 - A sign language interpreter for the hearing impaired.
- Remember specific community needs for future community involvement activities so that information is understandable to all.

Attachment 2: Planning/Implementation Checklist

Interview Preparation

- Choose a good time to schedule interviews
- Identify target area/audience for interviews
- Determine the number of interviews needed for a good Public Participation Plan (PPP)
- Obtain map of site and surrounding area

- Translator needed:
 - Yes ___ No ___
 - Name _____ Contacted/confirmed _____ Rate _____

- Contractor needed for support
 - Yes ___ No ___
 - Work assignment in place _____ Name _____
 - Confirmed _____

- Prepare the questions to be asked
- Print up finalized questionnaire to be used

Announcement

- Get phone numbers of interviewees
- Print out your scheduling call script
- Determine who makes appointments
 - Interviewer _____
 - Contractor _____
- Send confirming letter

Basic Supplies

- Note pads
- Site and area maps
- Business cards
- Daily appointment schedule



<https://www.epa.gov/rcra>

- Directions to each appointment
- Interviewee phone numbers

After the Interviews

- Review interview with contractor
- Plot especially contentious areas on map
- Plan the PPP
- Establish a deadline for the draft PPP, if applicable
- Send thank you letters to the citizens
- Mail additional questionnaires

Attachment 3: Sample Scheduling Call

Hi, My name is _____. I'm calling on behalf of the United States Environmental Protection Agency. By now you are probably aware of the _____ (proposed) Facility/proposed remedy in your community. "Facility or permitting agency" believes that citizens like yourself must have every opportunity to help make decisions that affect your community.

In about three weeks, I will be in your neighborhood. I'll be conducting interviews, and I would greatly appreciate your participation. You were chosen from a list of community members, and your interview will be completely anonymous. Your answers will help us get a better picture of what is important about this site. The interview will also help us understand what your community wants or needs from us.

I'll be in town the week of _____, on (give the choice of 4 different days) and I would like to arrange a time that will be convenient for you to meet with me.

(If they agree, give an example; Tuesday between 1-2 PM is taken but...) Great! Can I meet with you at your home? Or is there another location that you might prefer? Let's plan to spend about an hour together, but it could be less.

I'll confirm our appointment before that date. If you need to reach me, please don't hesitate to call me at (give telephone number). Thank you for your participation; your input can help shape this cleanup. I look forward to meeting you on (Date, day, and time).

Attachment 4: Sample Confirming Letter

Dear X,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the community interviews for the _____ Facility permit application/ modification/ proposed corrective action remedy. I enjoyed speaking with you by telephone and look forward to learning more about your concerns about the site and the impact it has had on your community.

To help you get ready for our interview, I have enclosed a questionnaire that I would like to ask you to complete before we meet. This questionnaire will help both of us; it will help you get your thoughts organized for the meeting, and it will help us complete our understanding of (**insert name of town**) needs and concerns about the site. Your answers, which will remain totally anonymous, combined with the answers from other interviews, will help me create a public participation plan that is specifically designed for (**insert name of town**).

I have enclosed a postage paid business reply envelope addressed to our contractor. When returning the questionnaire; please do not put your return address on it.

I have scheduled our interview for X PM on (**insert day and date**). If your schedule changes, I can be reached at (**insert telephone #**). I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

insert name Title

Attachment 5: Information Needed From an Interview

Answers to the following questions will give you a wealth of information from which to help prepare your **Public Participation Plan**. These are not meant to be the actual questions you would use during your community interviews; rather, they are the guides around which you should design your interview questions.

1. What does the individual know about the facility? (Interpretation — you need to determine how much is known and how much is thought to be known; how much is accurate)
2. What/who is the source of this knowledge?
3. What does the individual think about the facility?
4. What or who is the source of this opinion?
5. Does the individual want more information about the facility and what we are doing?
6. How does the individual want to receive that information?
7. Is facility/permitting agency viewed as a credible, trustworthy source of information?
8. What does the individual want/need to know?
9. What are the individuals' fears/concerns/issues? Technical (including real risk, immediate versus long term risk), psychological (outrage or perceived risk), social, economic, legal.
10. How does the individual describe community concerns, issues, fears? Technical, psychological, social, economic, legal.
11. What is the facility history relative to the community?
12. Does the individual want to be involved with the process in any way beyond passively receiving information?
13. Does the individual think the community in general would like some involvement?
14. Is there a local activist or group addressing the facility? Is this person seen as more/less credible than the facility/permitting agency?
15. What does the individual think the community wants to know?
16. How does the individual prefer to get information about the site?
17. How much does the individual want interaction with the permitting agency?
18. Who else in the community should we be talking with?
19. How are local officials perceived within the community?
20. How does the individual typically get his or her information about important issues?
21. What is the most popular newspaper, TV station, and radio station in the area?
22. Are there local radio or TV talk shows that the permit applicant/permitting agency could use?
23. Is there a cable TV operation with local access and local programming?
24. Are there local civic/service clubs that could be useful to disseminate information via speeches?
25. Are there appropriate opportunities to reach children through schools or youth groups?