# VOLUNTEER INTERVIEWING GUIDE

This sample Volunteer Interviewing Guide provides volunteers with the strategies they need to respectfully deliver a PiT Count survey. The Volunteer Interviewing Guide does not replace the need for training. Instead, the guide serves as a supplementary resource for volunteers to prepare themselves for the PiT Count. This sample guide only includes information pertaining to ethical research and consent. You will need to provide your volunteers with additional information about safety, how the survey works, what to wear and general logistics. We encourage you to customize this sample guide, as much as is needed, to fit the requirements of your count.

*This resource is based on an interview guide prepared by Disability Rights Promotion International.*

# The Role of a Volunteer

As a volunteer, you have an important, challenging and demanding role. PiT Count surveys must be delivered accurately and respectfully, in a very-limited timeframe. Nonetheless, it is important that survey participants feel comfortable, safe and respected. As you prepare for the count, consider which qualities and skills you will need to be successful.

| Qualities of an Effective Volunteer | |
| --- | --- |
| Qualities | Applying the Qualities |
| Objectivity | Approach survey participants without bias. Avoid inserting your own personal views or expectations into the survey process. Remain friendly, but neutral. |
| Patience | Do your best to remain calm and understanding during the survey. Ask a team member or your Team Leader for assistance if needed. |
| Communication | Ask questions clearly and accurately. Listen thoughtfully to the responses of participants and consider how their answer fits best into the response options on the survey. |
| Confidential | Respect the privacy of survey participants. Do not share any personal information that you hear - however banal -with your friends, family or colleagues. If you hear something that concerns you, speak to your Team Leader or the PiT Count Coordinator. |
| Compassion | Recognize that homelessness is for many a difficult and trying situation. Be compassionate, but avoid temptations to become overly personal with survey participants. |
| Detail-Orientated | Place close attention to the survey instructions. Capture the experiences of the survey participants, while following the questions as written. |

# Starting the Survey: Script, Screening & Consent

## The Script

We have provided you with a short and informative script. The script serves to introduce you, your role as a volunteer and the purpose of the PiT Count. You should practice saying the script in a way that is comfortable for you. You will need to say it multiple times throughout your shift.

## Obtaining Consent

You must ask the people you approach if they are willing to participate in the survey. If they say no, do not push them further. Thank them for their time and tally them, as instructed in your volunteer training.

## The Screening Questions

The screening questions determine who is eligible to participate in the survey. While many people have a range of challenges related to housing, the PiT Count is only designed to capture certain forms of homelessness or housing difficulties. Follow the instructions on the survey. Only do the survey with those that are eligible to participate.

## Confidentiality and Privacy

Assure survey participants that the information they are providing is strictly confidential. Explain that all the survey responses will be combined together. No information will be released about a single person.

# The Importance of Consent

## Why Informed Consent is Important

Survey participants must provide verbal, informed consent. Informed consent means that when people agree to do the survey, they understand what the survey is about, why it is being asked and what will happen with the data.

## Consent Must Be Freely Given

Consent should not only be *informed* (made by someone who understands the situation), but also *freely given.* Individuals should not be pressured into giving their consent where it is clear that they do not wish to participate.

## Consent Can Be Withdrawn at Any Time

Survey participants can stop the survey or choose to skip a question at any time. This should be made clear at the *beginning* of the interview. If someone changes their mind partway through the survey, end the survey and record “withdrawn” on the survey and tally sheet.

## Ability to Provide Consent

Some people experiencing homelessness are also dealing with addictions and/or mental health challenges. **However, potential participants should not be excluded simply because they’re under the influence of drugs or alcohol.**

As an interviewer, you will need to determine as to whether someone is capable of giving consent. If they have considerable difficultly understanding your first few questions, or show significant confusion as the survey progresses, end the survey. Notify your Team Leader immediately.

If you are unsure whether they understand what they are consenting to you may want to ask a couple of questions to determine their ability to take part in the survey:

* Do you understand what the survey is about?
* Do you have any questions about the survey?

Sometimes, communication issues may be due to a language barrier. Let your Team Leader know and they can call Headquarters, who will follow-up accordingly.

**If you feel unsure, unsafe or concerned about the safety of an individual, speak to your Team Leader immediately.**

# During the Interview: Strategies that Show Courtesy, Understanding and Respect

## Understanding the Emotions of the Survey Participant

Be sensitive to the situations that the person may have experienced. Be particularly sensitive to the possibility that the interview itself may, if it brings up bad memories, create some distress.

Do not try to provide counselling or support (beyond a sympathetic ear) to the person you are talking with **even if** you have previous experience or a story that relates. We have provided you with resource cards to give participants. Encourage them to contact one of the available services.

Do not try to push anyone. If a topic arises that is too emotional or sensitive for the witness, change the subject and come back at a later time or just note “did not answer” on the survey sheet.

Allow participants space to experience their emotions including raising their voice, crying etc. Remember, participants, when discussing certain events, are reliving a moment that has pain attached. Again, be *compassionate and kind*, but do not engage in counseling. Your job is to document, not to counsel.

**If a person appears overly distressed or indicates that they need help, notify your Team Leader immediately.**

## Respect and Courtesy

While the interview is generally fairly short – approximately 15 minutes depending upon the number of questions being asked – there is still an opportunity to develop feelings of trust.

You can do this by:

* Avoiding judgment.
* Showing participants that you are interested in what they have to say. Maintain eye contact, have an open body language. Listen to their answers.
* Using familiar, everyday language that will be easily understood. Ask survey questions as written, but feel free to provide clarifications or examples to participants if they have questions.

## Being a Good Surveyor

Avoid asking the questions too fast. Ensure that the interviewee has finished answering the last question before moving on.

While in many interview settings a free-flow conversation is important, the nature of the PiT count survey means that you should try to ask the questions in the same order each time **and** in the same way. Wording is important and has been carefully designed and agreed upon through a consultative process.

**Make sure you ask all the questions. Do not make assumptions based on appearance.**

## Being a Good Listener

Learn the art of being a good listener. Above all, make it clear that you are interested in what the survey participant is saying and show interest.

Be aware and receptive to nonverbal communication; observe the body language of the participant, and your own.

Allow moments of silence. Remember that the interviewee has not heard the question before. While most of the PiT count questions are simple, there may be issues of recall that the person is working through before answering.

Be patient and listen to each answer. Do not talk over the person. You should never *force* anyone to answer questions, but you should be patient in allowing them time to consider and respond to your questions

Do not express opinions while surveying.

Try to be very careful not to communicate, through body language, facial expressions or other means, that you do not believe or object to what is being said, even if that is the case.

## Asking Sensitive or Seemingly Obvious Questions

There are a few questions that could be deemed to be very sensitive or obvious, for example questions about sexual orientation, gender and ethnicity. **While you are conducting the survey, do not assume any characteristics about a person including ethnicity, gender, age or any other qualities.**

If you are uncomfortable asking certain questions, you may want to start the survey with something like:

*“I need to ask every person the same set of questions using the same language. As a result, I will be asking you a number of questions that you may think are obvious. We ask these questions to gather important information. I don’t want to make any assumptions.”*

Be prepared to explain why a certain question is being asked. During our Volunteer Training we explained the purpose of each question - feel free to share this information if participants ask.

**Don’t forget! *All* questions should be asked carefully and discreetly.**

## Probing/Prompting

*Probing* is asking follow-up questions when we do not fully understand a response, when answers are vague or ambiguous or when we want to obtain more information. If a person’s response does not fit within the response options listed on the survey, ask them to clarify. You might find it helpful to show them the survey and the options available to you.

## Be Aware of your Surroundings

You, and your team, should be aware of your surroundings. Pay close attention to the body language of everyone that is near. If you feel uncomfortable, nervous or threatened in a shelter, service or on the street, let your Team Leader know and withdraw from the situation.

# Ending the Interview

Finally, when the interview is complete, be sure to thank the person and emphasize the value of the information they provided. Do not suggest that the PiT Count will result in more housing or services. If participants have questions, answer them to the best of your ability and encourage them to contact the PiT Count coordinator (contact details are listed on the resource card).

**Before you leave:**

* Review the question sheet to ensure you have asked all of the questions. Clarify anything that you didn’t understand.
* Offer participants the [**INSERT HONORARIA**] and a resource card.

# 

# After Your Shift

## Understanding your Own Emotions

You may hear some upsetting stories. Be easy on yourself – you are not the cause of this person’s distress. During your shift, if you feel upset, scared or troubled, notify your team leader or contact headquarters. Do not hesitate to withdraw yourself from any situations that make you uncomfortable.

After your shift, we encourage you to share your concerns or feelings with your team leader or PiT Count coordinator – the wellbeing of our volunteers is a priority.

# A Note to PiT Count Coordinators:

The safety of your volunteers and survey participants should be your number one priority. While physical safety is important, consider what resources are available to support the emotional safety of volunteers and participants. A debrief process at the end of the count, where volunteers are given the opportunity to speak about their experiences, can go a long way.