

2018 Point-In-Time: Volunteer Interviewing Guide



Please Note:

This 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 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.

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 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 PIT 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.
Confidentiality	Respect the privacy of survey participants. Do not share any personal information that you hear - however mundane – with your friends, family or colleagues. If you hear something that concerns you, speak to your PIT 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	Pay close attention to the survey instructions. Capture the experiences of the survey participants, while following the questions as written.

A Typical Survey in a...

Unsheltered Location

There are five steps to completing a PIT count survey. As an unsheltered volunteer you should:

1. Identify yourself, engage potential participants and explain the purpose of the count.
2. Deliver the script and the consent process. Obtain verbal consent to proceed.
3. Ask the screening questions. Determine if the individual is eligible.
4. If eligible, administer the survey questions, recording the participant's responses. If ineligible, thank them for their time and move on.
5. Thank the respondent for their participation. If possible, provide the participant with donated items.

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 make sure to count them using the "Observation" survey.

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 those that are literally homeless (sleeping on streets, car, camp, abandoned building, etc.). 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 instead record the interaction using the “Observation” survey.

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 difficulty understanding your first few questions, or show significant confusion as the survey progresses, end the survey and notify your PIT Leader.

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 PIT Leader know and they will follow-up accordingly.

If you feel unsure, unsafe or concerned about the safety of an individual, speak to your PIT 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 counseling or support (beyond a sympathetic ear) to the person you are talking with **even** if you have previous experience or a story that relates. If you are aware of local resources that may help the participant, 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.

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 PIT Leader immediately.

Respect and Courtesy

While the interview is generally fairly short – approximately 3-5 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.

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 or 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 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. The Volunteer Training explains the purpose of each question - feel free to share this information if participants ask.

Don’t forget! All questions should be asked neutrally 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 PIT 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. If necessary, contact your PIT lead for more information.

Before you leave:

- Look over the survey to ensure you have recorded responses to all of the questions. Clarify anything that you didn't understand.
- If applicable, offer participants the donated items and resource information.

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 PIT Leader or a team member. Do not hesitate to withdraw yourself from any situations that makes you uncomfortable.

After your shift, we encourage you to share your concerns or feelings with your PIT Leader or Texas Homeless Network staff member– the wellbeing of our volunteers is a priority.

Sample Volunteer Script

Hello, my name is _____, and I am helping _____ conduct a short survey of our community. We would like to learn more about people experiencing homelessness, what kinds of problems they face, and whether or not their needs are being met.

Your participation is strictly voluntary, and all of your responses are strictly confidential. Your privacy will be protected and respected. If questions make you uncomfortable you do not have to answer them. Your answers will not affect the services you receive. Would you be willing to take a few minutes to answer some questions?