Evaluation Topic Conference Call Series
RWJ Better Jobs Better Care Grantees
CMS Direct Service Community Workforce Grantees
Institute for the Future of Aging Services and The Lewin Group

5/6/04 Call Summary
Surveying Direct Service (Care) Workers: Administration and Methodology

Facilitated by Karen Linkins of The Lewin Group
Topic introduction by Farida Ejaz of the Margaret Blenkner Research Institute

Topic Introduction

They had only planned to do in-person interviews but ended up also doing telephone interviews as well to accommodate availability of staff for research purposes. Survey was conducted through in-person interviews and focus groups.

Key Lessons Learned

- In surveying direct service workers you have to be flexible. There is no one type of methodology that works. You almost have to bend over backwards to get workers to participate.
- Longitudinal studies are hard. Their grant that tracked workers from the time they were initially trained as nurse assistants to their first job in a nursing home demonstrated that this is a transient population, sometimes actually homeless. They moved from address to address, making it very difficult to track them even though 235 individuals had completed an informed consent to participate form on the last day of their training. 1-3 months later (first job in a nursing home) they only had 49 completed interviews. They realized that many of the trainees were going from training to training in an effort to maintain their welfare benefits. Many of these people never took jobs as direct care workers, just bounced from training to training. The 75 hours of initial training made it an attractive, short training that such recipients could enroll in and keep benefits. We learned that it is important to get a relative's phone number (someone who has lived in the same residence for at-least three years), and a grandmother's contact information can be the most helpful. In another study that involved already working NA (not new workers) they got a 76% response.
- If interviews are planned on site, it is important to make arrangements with the facilities ahead of time
    - Have someone from the trade associations write to the agency ahead of time to explain about the study and the evaluators
    - Try to identify a committed site liaison, a spokesperson at the site
    - Arrange for the facility to let you conduct interviews with staff on-site, in a quiet room off the floor, away from residents

    - Arrange for the facility to give you a reserved block of time so staff are not paged in the middle and have to return to the floor. Offer to pay for substitute staff if need be.
- Use appropriate incentives
    - Paying respondents $20 each worked. Pay respondents at the end of the session, to encourage them to stay and finish.
    - It helps to pay a token fee to the facility to get a list of names for random sampling, or having someone at the facility conduct the random sampling. They heard of one researcher who paid each site $800 and got very few refusals.
    - Bring food, if acceptable, in addition to the monetary incentive.
    - Ask site ahead of time what food the staff will like: pizza, sandwiches, sodas, etc.
    - Be aware of Kosher facilities, other food restrictions.
    - Bring non-perishable items if you plan to be there all day.
- Try to match interviewers with respondents racially, when possible
- Have interviewers dress similarly to respondents, do not dress up or down
- When holding focus groups, have respondents fill out demographic information at the beginning and then try to make sure they do not leave before completing full survey. Some sites would try to be helpful by replacing workers who started the group with other workers to finish it, which does not work because demographic data won't match. Have an assistant taking notes, keeping track of those who were there and stayed, and who completed demographic survey. This is important if you want to publish your findings so you can report on the actual number that participated.
- Pay attention to timekeeping during focus groups, or they can sometimes turn into venting sessions. Make sure to stick to time and topics to keep the group on track.

Questions and Answers

Q: Could they talk about their experience doing mail or telephone surveys?
A: Mail requires a lot of follow up, calling people, mailing them reminders, begging and pleading. It helps with mail surveys to include a toll-free number for people to call with questions. MBRI did this in one survey on the satisfaction of family members of nursing home residents in Ohio and got a lot of calls. They also got a lot of after-hours calls, so they hired a student to answer or check the messages.

Q: Could they estimate the minimum cost of doing a large mail survey from beginning to end?
A: Hard to say.

Bob Konrad of UNC said that this depended on how good the addresses are and the literacy rate among the respondents. Being able to pay even $2 to each respondent will help.

Literacy is an issue with in-person paper surveys as well. It is good to have a researcher in the room while people complete an instrument in case respondents have questions. To make sure this is not perceived as insulting, talk to the nursing director privately and explain to him/her that workers can come ask questions if they need to.

Telephone surveys are really better in reaching an illiterate population, but having bad telephone numbers can be a huge frustration.

Q: Did they ask for Social Security numbers from the respondents?
A: No. You only have to get that if you are paying them more than $500 to take the survey.

Q: In doing a focus group, how did they get several people from the same agency free to meet with them at the same time? How did it work with shift changes, getting people to stay?
A: They talked to the directors ahead of time, reached an agreement about how many they could spare and which times would work best – usually lunchtime. Then they advertised the focus group with colorful fliers, explained the purpose of the research and that it was all private and confidential. Sometimes the agency would put an announcement in with the paycheck stubs. Sometimes directors would pull people in to participate. Sometimes agency will agree if you offer to pay for substitute workers. They also offered food during the focus group and asked the site liaison the type of food that workers would like.

Q: Would these same incentives/advertising techniques work to get people to come together to do a written survey?
A: They have used these techniques for back-to-back interviews in a site. They have also offered non-perishable food items in such situations. But it is more difficult to offer global incentives when you are going to conduct a random sample and know that some workers will not get selected. However, you can offer to pay the participants and pay the site something small so that they can do something special for those who don't get to participate.

Q: Which works best as an incentive, a sizable raffle or smaller token to each participant.
A: Ask people on the site what they would prefer. Sometimes you can do a $5-10 gift certificate for groceries or to Walmart, and also offer a bigger prize for a drawing. Some workers would prefer cash to gift certificates. Be aware that some workers will not participate in a raffle or drawing for religious reasons.

Q: Do they worry that customizing the incentives for different sites is a limitation to the validity of the study?
A: They do not think this is a big issue, but it has not been studied or addressed. This might be an interesting topic to study and write about.

The more common limitation in offering an incentive is selection bias, but this shouldn't vary enormously by the method of incentive you use. Certain people will respond to the incentive, others won't. Bob Konrad suggested that he has not observed a bias by age, gender or length of employment. There has been bias observed by shift.

Bob Konrad at UNC explained that they are collecting Social Security numbers from their respondents and having the Department of Labor match them against work histories. They think they may see a pattern there, some kind of selection bias. People who change jobs frequently may be less likely to respond to a survey. The field has very little information about temporary workers – you must decide whether you want to include that population or not. One measure of an agency's stability is the extent to which they rely on temporary workers. It is another measure of success. More information about their project, "Where have all the nurses aids gone?" can be found on their "Win a Step Up" website http://www.aging.unc.edu/research/winastepup/ and in the BJBC resource list.

By doing random sampling you can eliminate many of the selection bias issues. But because many workers may refuse, you have to go back into the substitute/replacement pool.

Q: How should language issues, differences in ethnicity be handled?
A: It is important to have someone interviewing who is of the same race and with the same language. Translation is always an issue. In doing focus groups, they have observed that the quality and depth of information they get changes according to the interviewer – even when no translation is needed.

In doing mailed surveys to a population of home care workers with multiple languages, they have trained other home care workers who speak that same language do the follow up phone calls.

You can also send a survey out in English with a postcard attached in another language directing them to call for more information.

Q: In measuring job satisfaction, is it better to ask a single item question or multiple item questions?
A: This is a trade off between accurate and concise. It is always a struggle to keep surveys short, but research shows that single item responses for any measure/construct as complex as job satisfaction can be limiting and lack variability. The problem is that people tend to say they are satisfied, unless you ask them several specific questions about what conditions are really like, what they like, what bothers them. Otherwise it is very hard to discriminate between the dissatisfied and the satisfied.

Multi-item measures demonstrate greater variability. Length is an issue, but you are still better off asking specific questions, especially when measuring outcomes. It would be very hard to get an accurate measurement of overall job satisfaction with one global question. Certain aspects of the job may be more or less related to turnover or retention. For example, research shows several conditions in particular can predict high turnover: intolerable supervision, chaotic work conditions, and job roles that are not well-defined.

Questions that ask workers to rate satisfaction compared to other jobs in their communities can also predict turnover.

You can also find and analyze trends more easily with specific questions, harder to find trends in one-dimensional measures.

Research shows that there are ethnic differences in how people respond to overall satisfaction questions. Asian groups tend to report higher dissatisfaction, for example. These ethnic differences will be amplified by using only a global question.

Q: How long do in-person worker interviews usually take? At what point do they start to lose people? Does a certain length of time keep people away?
A: Most of the interviews they've done have been 30-45 minutes, fairly closed-ended. They generally do not lose people after they start, especially if they get paid at the end. Getting them there to begin with is the hard part.

This length of time is not as bad for an in-person interview as it is for a written self-administered survey. UNC tries to keep their self-administered surveys to 8 pages, which takes about 20 minutes to administer orally. Anything longer than that can be a problem. They average a 40-60% response rate.

Q: Address to UNC: What has their response rate been doing mailed surveys, as opposed to doing them in-person with someone there to answer questions?
A: They have never mailed surveys to nurse aids. These are not random studies. They ask each agency for 30 workers, keep going until they reach 30. This is usually out of a universe of 40-45 – most facilities in NC are 60 beds total. They try to get all shifts, all times, but night shifts tend to produce lower response rates.

They generally hit their target of 30. If responses are not coming in, they drop the agency from the sample. So far they've had to drop 1 or 2 out of about 40.

Scripps Gerontology Center has produced a table that exemplifies using an appropriate sampling size depending on the size of a facility/number of residents served. Farida Ejaz will send this to the list, with the permission of Scripps.

Q: Have they had problems getting access to a list of employees?
A: Sometimes. Generally agencies do not want to release employee names unless the top leadership is very committed to the research goals. There is a great deal of apprehension about recruitment, union issues, and identity theft. They often cite legal restrictions, HIPAA, even though there really are no legal barriers. It's usually just against the policy of the Human Resources department.

Sometimes you can just get the total number of employees to use as your denominator, even if they refuse to give names.

Additional materials:
(The Lewin Group will make these available on the listserve as they are provided.)

- Farida Ejaz's Power Point for this presentation
- Table by Scripps Gerontology Center about appropriate sampling size

Please contact Carrie Blakeway (Carrie.Blakeway@Lewin.com) for more information about this call.