



Puertas Abiertas: Participant Focus Group Themes

The Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University has been working with Puertas Abiertas to create a range of evaluative strategies to support their grant reporting, particularly in relation to the City of Grand Rapids Participatory Budgeting initiative. As part of the strategies discussed, the Johnson Center conducted a focus group with 12 participants of various programs administered by Puertas Abiertas to gain deeper insights into their clients' experiences with the programming. The focus group findings will improve understanding of participants' experiences with Puertas Abiertas, highlighting areas where the organization is doing well, opportunities for improvement, and potential for growth. Participation was completely voluntary and key themes from the focus group are highlighted below.

Key Themes Identified

Safe and Welcoming Space: Participants learned about Puertas Abiertas through various channels, including local church events, Facebook videos, lawyers, word of mouth, and personal referrals. The organization's physical space and its people were described as welcoming, accepting, and supportive. Due to the positive atmosphere, many participants are eager to welcome newcomers and view themselves as proselytizers for the organization. One participant expressed, ***"Every time I have the opportunity, if I know someone who needs programs, I talk about this program with those people and I tell them, 'Go.'"***

Program participants feel accepted and free from judgement at Puertas Abiertas, with everyone embraced regardless of their nationality or background. When asked about the organization, one participant shared that ***"one does not feel judged nor discriminated against, you feel accepted."*** These values were ingrained among participants as a key part of participating in the organization's programming, which helps contribute to their feelings of security and well-being. Additionally, they emphasized that Puertas Abiertas gives them hope, and they trust the community it fosters. As one participant put it best, ***"Here at Puertas Abiertas one feels a sense of hope, like there is someone you can count on."***

Support from Puertas Abiertas: Participants expressed deep gratitude for the support they received from Puertas Abiertas, as well as for Andrea's personal role in creating a safe and welcoming environment. The organization provides a sense of safety and empowerment, especially for those who have experienced trauma or lived in unsafe conditions. It has helped participants cope with issues related to neighborhood violence, domestic struggles, and food insecurity.

Participants also emphasized the prominence of the community at Puertas Abiertas. The organization fosters a sense of belonging and mutual support, where participants connect, help each other with their needs, and often refer each other to other services. Social activities like group meetings, exercise classes, and educational workshops help build a supportive network among both participants and staff. The sense that participants became stronger and more self-sufficient through their participation was a recurring statement. One



participant explained, ***“It [Puertas Abiertas help] has helped me a lot and I am very grateful. It has made me very strong, and it makes me feel like I can do many things, things that I have not felt I could do.”***

Familiarity and Engagement with Programs: Participants expressed familiarity with the wide range of programs and services offered at Puertas Abiertas, including counseling, GED classes, English as a second language (ESL) classes, leadership training, and food pantry services. In addition, the organization provides support through legal assistance and court accompaniment, as well as help with daily tasks such as reading letters and responding to emails. These many programs and services have helped participants become stronger and more self-sufficient.

Challenges and Suggestions

Overall, the group expressed high satisfaction with the support and services provided by Puertas Abiertas, with one participant sharing, ***“It’s always a yes, never a no,”*** when it comes to finding ways to help their clients. Participants offered three key suggestions for improving Puertas Abiertas’ services.

1. **Learning and Educational Opportunities:** Some participants expressed a desire for more adult literacy and ESL classes, as well as tutoring services, potentially through partnerships with other organizations. The [Literacy Center of West Michigan](#) may be a place to start exploring collaboration around ESL classes and tutoring. There was also an interest in more opportunities for driving lessons. Options may exist for partnership with for-profit driving schools that are willing to provide services to nonprofits for a discount or group rate.
2. **Transportation and Accessibility:** Participants highlighted the need for more transportation options to help get to and from their group sessions, particularly in the winter months, as some walk to support group and program meetings. The lack of transportation during winter was cited as a barrier to accessing Puertas Abiertas’ services. Some participants also suggested additional or adjusted meeting times to make it easier for them to attend sessions. Again, this is an area to look to potential partnerships with The Rapid around door-to-door transportation options and potentially with Uber and Lyft, which may provide nonprofit discounts.
3. **Collaboration and Outreach:** Lastly, participants recommend Puertas Abiertas collaborate with other community organizations to expand and enhance outreach efforts.

The focus group results indicate that Puertas Abiertas is providing an invaluable service in the community. The recommendations and suggestions are all around reaching more of the community and expanding meeting times and service options, not around improving services. The staff of Puertas Abiertas can keep doing what they are doing – they have created a strong community and sense of belonging that participants want to bring more people into.