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Gathering and Using Family Input to Improve Child Support and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Services: Approaches from the Human Services Field



Seeking feedback from families about program operations and services can shape more effective and equitable social programs and benefit future families. Typically, program leaders aim to improve the effectiveness of programs by systematically collecting information from staff, program partners, research partners, and program data systems to inform improvements. However, human services programs do not consistently engage families for their feedback during continuous improvement processes.

This brief describes practices from across the human services field that can inspire novel approaches to engaging families during program improvement, especially in Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and child support programs.

In this brief, we highlight:

- / Key findings from a scan of academic and non-academic literature, including guidebooks and

frameworks, related to collecting and using family input in human services programs.

- / Findings from discussions with program leaders from state, local, and Tribal human services agencies that collect and apply families' input to their program operations. We feature these findings in text boxes throughout this brief.

We detail current practices for gathering input from families, how programs infuse that input into program policies and service delivery, and approaches to build trust with families throughout the process.

We use the term "family" throughout this brief to include people who might be eligible, people who receive services, and past participants of a human services program such as TANF or child support. When programs referenced in this brief use another term to describe input from people they serve, we use that term instead.

Moving Forward: Furthering Family Input study

The [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\) and Child Support Moving Forward: Further Incorporating Family Input](#) study seeks to advance knowledge of how TANF and child support programs can incorporate family input to inform program improvements and operations. The project will accomplish this by:

- Conducting a literature scan and having discussions with program leaders about how to collect and apply families' input to program operations; this brief summarizes the scan and those discussions.
- Gathering and consulting with an Expert Workgroup consisting of members with diverse identities and experiences, including TANF and child support program staff and people currently or previously served by those programs.
- Creating family input resources to support TANF and child support programs to design, collect, and analyze family input to inform program improvement.
- Piloting these resources with select programs and conducting formative rapid-cycle testing to inform revisions to these resources.
- Disseminating revised family input resources publicly for TANF and child support programs to use and adapt.

The literature scan summarized in this brief focused on how human services programs obtain and infuse families' input into continuous improvement efforts. We will use these practices to develop family input resources to help child support and TANF programs engage families in program improvement.

Most people working in human services accept that gathering and using family input improves direct service programs. However, this approach is still emerging and has a limited evidence base (Skelton-Wilson et al. 2021). State and local agencies are increasingly engaging families to drive conversations about improving access, quality, and outcomes of service delivery to advance equity within their organizations. This approach aligns with the Office of Management and Budget's recent recommendation to federal agencies to advance equity goals by expanding opportunities for meaningful engagement and by "adopt[ing] more accessible mechanisms for co-designing programs and services with underserved communities and customers" (Office of Management and Budget 2021).

Little literature focuses on engaging families for their feedback in continuous improvement processes in human services programs. However, ample literature focuses on gathering family input in human services programs either (1) as part of research activities aimed to create knowledge for the broader field, or (2) to meet reporting or compliance requirements for agencies, programs, funders, or other external partners.

The lessons from these resources are nevertheless relevant for how human services programs might gather and use family input to help shape their policies, services, and operations. For example, literature on participatory research approaches advises researchers to involve the programs and people being studied in developing recommendations based on the study's findings (Ozer 2021). Similarly, human services programs might involve families in developing recommendations during continuous improvement processes.

How are families defined in the literature about collecting and using family input in human services programs?

The literature uses various terms to describe people served by and engaging in human services programs. Some literature describes these people as recipients of services, using the term "client," whereas other literature uses "participant" to capture family members' active role in using services and providing input. Some literature focuses on people's identities or specific characteristics as they engage with a program and provide input, and uses terms such as "individuals

living in poverty," "parents," "children," "individuals with disabilities," "youth in foster care," and "noncustodial parents." For example, literature focused on gathering and using input from young people in foster care and teens in pregnancy prevention programs commonly uses the term "youth" (Capacity Building Center for States 2019; Children's Bureau 2020; Cohen 2021; Falkenburger 2021; Gothro and Caplan 2018).

Often, the literature uses terms that encompass those currently receiving services and others who might have indirect or past experiences with the program's services, policies, and processes. These include the following terms:

- / **People with lived experience.** This term includes people who have shared experiences or backgrounds and who can bring insights to inform and enhance systems, research, policies, practices, and programs that aim to support people with similar lived experiences (Skelton-Wilson et al. 2021). This term encompasses current families served by human services programs and families who might receive services or who have not received services for many years. It can include agency and program staff who have previous experience receiving services in the programs they oversee. Staff with lived experiences bring valuable perspectives but are not substitutes for families currently experiencing programs.
- / **Community members.** Community members typically include people from partner organizations, such as community service agencies or school districts, and recipients of human services programs. When the literature uses this term, it is more difficult to determine the contributions that current program families made to the program improvement process or how they were involved in the engagement effort, in part because the term encompasses multiple groups within a community. In addition, when programs engage "community members" broadly, the voices of the families they serve—although part of the community—can be outnumbered by the voices of other members of the community.

Clarifying terms for listening to families

Human services programs might use similar terms to describe different goals and approaches to working with families they serve. Clarifying these terms within human services agencies and programs can shed light on current practices and can help programs develop goals for future family engagement.

For this brief, we use the term "engagement" to describe the process of gathering and using input from families. We use the term "input" to describe the feedback or ideas that families provide to programs about their services, policies, or operations for continuous improvement. We describe the specific actions and activities of programs and agencies as part of their "engagement strategies."

- **"Engagement" or "input."** In the literature, these terms typically refer to increasing an individual's participation in services and activities, and tailoring and individualizing services. In this brief, we use these terms to mean systematic feedback from families gathered for the purpose of informing program processes, services, and policies, also described as continuous improvement.
- **"Human-centered."** This term, regularly used in literature focused on continuous improvement in human services, does not necessarily mean opportunities for family input. Instead, these activities focus on working with and among frontline program staff to build empathy for families and their experiences.

Some programs begin their engagement efforts by working directly with families to identify terms that best fit their relationship with the program (Michigan Department of Health and Human Services 2021). The terms that programs use to describe these efforts have implications for who they include in their engagement activities, so it is important to be intentional about the language selected.

How do human services programs gather and use family input?

Understanding the variation in programs' approaches to family input

How programs gather and use family input varies widely, depending on what programs want to learn

and how they intend to use the input. To classify various strategies for collecting and using family input, we relied on the [International Association for Public Participation \(IAP2\) Spectrum of Public Participation](#). Several federal, state, and local human services agencies use this framework to guide and inspire strategic plans and toolkits for engaging families to gather and use input.

The IAP2 Spectrum helps explain differences in how programs engage families for feedback, including the degree of communication, collaboration, and assignment of decision-making power between programs and families. It also explains the commitment, or promise, programs make to families about how families can participate in the program improvement process. The spectrum includes the following five levels of engagement (from shallow to deep engagement) and the associated promises to families:



1. Programs **inform** families about program and policy changes, how changes affect families, and where families can find resources describing these changes. The associated promise is that the program will keep families informed.



2. Programs **consult** families when they systematically gather family feedback about a topic or range of topics. Programs then share that feedback with program staff—and sometimes the public. The associated promise is that programs will consider family input and provide feedback as to how the input influenced program changes.



3. Programs **involve** families by providing multiple opportunities for two-way communication between program staff and families, during which families share their perspectives about and responses to proposed program changes. The associated promise is that programs will give families access to the decision-making process and decision makers. They will seek families' input throughout the process, and families will receive direct feedback on how their input influenced program changes.



4. Programs **collaborate** with families when families not only share their feedback about the program and proposed solutions, but also work with programs collaboratively to create solutions or improvement strategies. The associated promise is that the program will engage families in all key activities and decisions, and the program will aim to incorporate solutions and strategies that families propose.



5. Programs **empower** families by giving families the autonomy to make final decisions about changes to the program's policies, service delivery, or processes. The associated promise is that the program will implement what families decide.

Deeper family engagement might not be appropriate for every context. The family engagement spectrum captures important features of the depth and nature of engagement, which should align with program goals. For example, the [Colorado Department of Human Services' \(CDHS\) Family Voice Council](#) consists of parents with lived experience with CDHS programs, and the council collaborates with all CDHS programs to improve services, policy, and operations. Individual programs, however, sometimes also engage families through focus groups or surveys if they want to hear from a broader group of families or only need one-time feedback about a program change. Later in this brief, we provide more details on the Family Voice Council and examples of each level of engagement.



Equity and Family Input

Using family input can advance goals for equitable service delivery within human services programs, if programs commit time and resources and work intentionally.

- Family input can be used to **challenge deep-rooted assumptions** about people seeking support (Coleman 2021).
- Family input with two-way communication can **make processes more transparent** (Chicago Beyond 2019).
- Including family in the collection and use of their input can enable families **to build skills in advocacy and leadership**.

Programs that aim to gather and use family input respectfully should consider the equity implications of the engagement opportunities. Deeper approaches, with their greater investments in relationship building, can build capacity among families. Deeper opportunities for engagement might be particularly important for families with logistical or systemic barriers to participating in decision-making processes. Barriers to participating might include limited existing knowledge of program policies and operations, or a lack of trust to share their experiences with program staff (Beyond Inclusion 2020). These same families might also face barriers to accessing program services and complying with program requirements—which means their feedback and ideas might be particularly helpful in a program improvement process.

Program staff and leaders might consider referencing these practical guides and resources, which include recommendations for equitable family engagement and language practices:

- [Beyond Inclusion, Equity in Public Engagement: A Guide for Practitioners](#). This resource outlines principles for equitable family engagement and specific steps for integrating these principles into practitioners' work.
- [Principles of Community Engagement](#). This resource is a comprehensive guide for planning and managing engagement efforts, including principles for engaging culturally and experientially diverse communities, and examples of researchers overcoming obstacles to working with different communities.
- [Person-Centered Language Tip Sheet](#). This resource provides examples and guidance for shifting language toward more strength-based and equitable terms.

In addition to depth, we identified scale and time commitment as two key ways that family engagement approaches vary among human services agencies.



The **scale** of an engagement means planning how many family perspectives a program would like to hear from. Programs can aim to include input from as few as one family member or as many as all families, depending on the goal of the engagement. Shallower levels of engagement enable programs to more readily gather input from a larger number of families, because they require less effort.



Programs might choose to use approaches at *different depths* along the spectrum at *different phases* of a continuous improvement initiative to reflect program and family needs and readiness to use an approach.



The **time commitment** of an engagement refers to how long the program engages with the same group of families to gather and use their input. Higher levels of engagement require greater commitments by staff and families because they typically involve repeated engagement over a longer period.

Examples along the spectrum of family engagement in human services programs

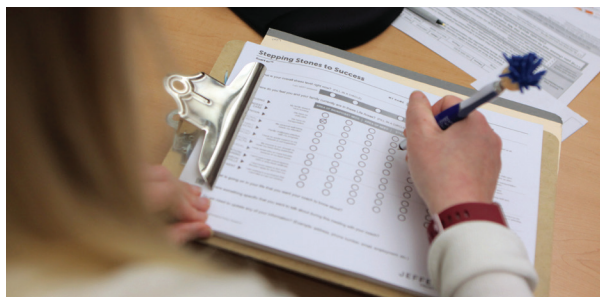
This section draws on the literature we reviewed to describe approaches that human services programs use to gather and apply family input. We have organized the approaches into categories aligned with the IAP2 Spectrum—that is, based on the depth of the engagement with families. The approaches and examples we provide do not always fall neatly into one of these categories, but do illustrate different points along the spectrum.



1. Informing families

When human services programs inform families, they provide standard information about accessing and navigating resources. Nearly universally, programs communicate with families about program services, policies, or operations changes. These are typically one-directional communications, such as mailed letters, notices, or email blasts. Many human services programs are familiar with this approach and use it more frequently than any of the other approaches; however, we did not focus our literature scan on this form of family engagement.

Some programs help families navigate program services or changes in more personalized ways, such as a [Parent Partner Program Navigator](#), used in some state and local child welfare programs. In these programs, parents and caregivers new to the program are assigned a peer mentor with experience in the program. The peer mentor provides additional information about program resources and processes. Approaches like this can build trust between families and programs, develop leadership skills among family members, and serve as a starting place for higher levels of engagement (Hinkle et al. 2022).



2. Consulting with families

Consultations are primarily one-directional, with programs gathering feedback or identifying broader needs that inform future improvement efforts. Programs consult families for their input in human services program in the following ways:

/ **Integrated feedback opportunities on services.**

Ongoing program activities that ask people to provide feedback through a periodic brief survey or immediately following service receipt offer opportunities to learn about families' satisfaction. This approach tends to rely on close-ended questions, such as yes-or-no questions about satisfaction with elements of services and space for open-ended feedback.

/ **One-time feedback on current or new processes or services.**

One-time focus groups, interviews, and surveys are a common form of consultation to solicit targeted feedback on processes or services. The California Department of Child Support Services used this type of engagement to understand current perspectives and rebrand the program's work. They convened focus groups across 17 counties with program management, staff, and families to better understand the sources of the misaligned perspectives among these groups (Simas 2018).

/ **Identification of the extent of a need or issue.**

Finally, programs have used family surveys to understand how widely a problem affects the broader community of families. For example, the California Department of Social Services identified the need to incorporate youth voices in developing a survey to gather youth perspectives on the state's Continuum of Care Reform legislation. Pre-testing the survey with youth helped modify the language in the survey. It helped the Department understand that a key area of concern—the overmedication of foster youth—was missing from the survey (Capacity Building Center for States 2021).



3. Involving families

Involving families in identifying issues and possible solutions alongside program staff helps agencies learn and builds capacity for family members. A common approach for this level of engagement is

advisory boards or workgroups that program staff can turn to repeatedly for feedback. Depending on their design, community advisory boards and workgroups can vary significantly in their scope and degree of power (Arnos et al. 2021). These groups can have a diverse membership and include community-based organization representatives and program or agency staff and families. In these cases, programs must consider the power dynamics in mixed-membership groups and strategies to strengthen family voices and input (National Child Traumatic Stress Network 2019).

The following are examples of approaches to involving families in program improvement decision making—that is, two-way engagements in which families provide input on topics and discuss them with program staff:

/ Feedback during program planning processes.

Many human services programs and agencies gather groups of family members to contribute to planning and research activities. For example, the Children’s Bureau’s Youth At-Risk of Homelessness initiative, to prevent homelessness among youth and young adults with previous child welfare involvement, funded grantees who took a variety of approaches to gathering and using youth input in the service planning process. Each grantee used a mix of youth input approaches, including youth focus groups and surveys focused on risk factors and service needs, community charrette¹ events, and SpeakOut² events in which grantees gathered survey and qualitative discussion data. Grantees asked participating youth to vote on proposed services. Some grantees also invited youth to joint planning teams or created youth advisory boards to continue to hear from youth during planning processes (Gothro and Caplan 2018). The Quinault Indian Nation’s Tribal TANF program’s approach to gathering feedback



Quinault Indian Nation, Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

The [Quinault Indian Nation’s Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\) program](#) serves about 75 families across three program offices. Program staff are Tribal members or have close ties to Tribal members and Tribal TANF recipients. Program leaders rely on their strong relationships with TANF participants and relationships with other Tribal service programs to gather and respond to participant feedback. Staff gather and apply participant feedback using the following approaches:

- Sending annual and ad hoc, open-ended-question surveys to participants to gather feedback on areas for improvement, further investment, and ways the Tribal TANF program can better meet families’ needs. The Tribal TANF program partners with other Tribal programs for the surveys so that feedback can inform multiple programs. Surveys are announced in the monthly Tribal newsletter, including explanations of the survey’s goals. Respondents receive \$50 for completing these surveys, which program staff believe is a key factor driving high survey response rates.
- Tribal TANF leaders identify themes from responses to each survey question and share them with their staff and Tribal program partners to inform service improvements. In the monthly Tribal newsletter, the program reports a summary of the feedback, the resulting service changes, and what feedback the program cannot implement. Program staff revisit survey feedback when drafting their Tribal TANF plan. Program staff have found this to be a better system for ensuring participant input in the Tribe’s TANF plan than traditional public comment approaches.

in day-to-day service delivery and through targeted surveys is another example of how programs can gather feedback to inform program service planning (see the box above).

¹ A charrette is a multiday, time-bound, collaborative event that typically includes brainstorming, sketching and design workshops, and other activities to provide feedback loops for the design process. Participants produce a map of suggested solutions.

² A SpeakOut is an open house with an informal and interactive public meeting designed for drop-in participation.

Road testing new processes and service prototypes. Programs can also involve families in piloting new processes and prototypes. In Dakota County, Minnesota, a program gathered and used client input by implementing a Participant Advisory Council as part of a rapid-cycle improvement process (Fleissner et al. 2020). The Participant Advisory Council provided monthly input on new and lingering process issues during the two-year design cycle. Staff completed rounds of prototyping, testing, and reflecting to develop an integrated human services model for the county. The model included child welfare, protection and crisis services, housing assistance, employment, and child care and home visiting services.

The Clark County, Ohio, Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program's Life in Transition group development process is another example of how participants can contribute to piloting and prototyping new services (see box

below). As with other examples, a program's family input initiative can include several approaches along the spectrum. This example places participants in a position to collaborate on program changes throughout the pilot, rather than simply providing feedback.



4. Collaborating with families

Collaborative engagements enable families to share their feedback about the program and generate solutions or improvement strategies. Other terms for this kind of engagement include "participatory" and "advisory" groups. The key difference from the advisory boards that programs use to involve families (described earlier) is that in collaborative approaches, programs give family members responsibilities that extend into decision making for program action. In our literature scan, we identified the following programs that have collaborated with families. We also summarize our



Life in Transition Group: Clark County, Ohio, Department of Job and Family Services, Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program

The Clark County, Ohio, Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program (CCMEP) provides employment coaching and preparation services to young adults ages 16–24 through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funding. In the months following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, CCMEP's offices were closed. Program participants reported feeling isolated, and staff observed declines in participant engagement in program activities. Based on outreach to participants, the program learned that participants wanted a voluntary peer-support group as a way to connect with other participants virtually—so CCMEP established the [Life In Transition \(LIT\)](#) group. CCMEP collaborated with participants to establish the LIT group in the following ways:

- CCMEP invited a few participants to design and plan how to structure and run the LIT peer support group, in collaboration with program staff. Although some program staff were anxious about having participants lead the group, program leaders gave the working group autonomy in selecting topics and the structure for each session in the six-week pilot. Participants and CCMEP staff decided that participants would lead the virtual meetings. Some CCMEP staff attended, too, primarily as technical support.
- The participant leaders and CCMEP staff jointly administered a participant feedback survey after each LIT meeting. They reviewed the feedback together and tailored the topics and structure of subsequent meetings. The six-week pilot culminated in the participant-leaders independently developing facilitation guides for future iterations of the LIT group.
- The time participant leaders spent designing and leading the sessions counted as an internship, and they were paid for their time. One of the participant leaders—now employed as staff by CCMEP—shared that this opportunity helped her develop planning and leadership skills.



Family Voice Council: Colorado Department of Human Services

The Colorado Department of Human Services' (CDHS) path to developing its [Family Voice Council](#) started with efforts to implement two-generation principles (based on the [Aspen Institute's work](#)). One of these principles is the inclusion of family voice in policy decisions. Before starting the Council, the agency held group meetings and one-on-one conversations with program and agency leaders to understand the value of and generate buy-in for engaging the Council.

The Council includes people with at least two lived experiences relevant to the agency's work, with the goal of representation across agency programs, geography, and identities. The Council develops its own strategic plan, including an agenda for topical and programmatic focus areas. CDHS programs collaborate with the Council in the following ways:

- CDHS programs are encouraged to engage the Council for feedback. Programs contact the director of family and community engagement to get on a future Council meeting agenda.
- The director and a member of the Council meet with program staff before the full Council meeting to set expectations for how to work with the Council and prepare them for the types of questions and feedback Council members will likely have.
- After the full Council meetings, program staff are expected to share with the Council how they used their feedback.

For example, the Child Support Services Program received a digital marketing grant around the same time the Council started. The Child Support Services Program staff engaged the Council during the four-year grant to test digital marketing approaches to reach and communicate with parents that would benefit from child support services. The timeline and funding enabled staff to engage the Council repeatedly and meaningfully to refine the approaches and learn about parent perspectives of the program's website functionality and language.



discussion with the Colorado Family Voice Council, another example of collaborating with families, in the box on the left.

/ **Family Support 360 Council, South Dakota**

Department of Human Services. Family Support 360 is an assistance program for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families (South Dakota Department of Human Services 2017). The Family Support Council was created through legislative action in 1994 to direct the design, implementation, and evaluation of program policy and support services provided by Family Support 360. The Council is entirely made up of program participants, with a minimum required representation for Native American members and members who have a developmental disability. The Council's primary activities include:

- Monitoring and providing recommendations on policy changes
- Supporting the resolution of program grievances
- Providing a platform for participant and participant family feedback

The South Dakota Department of Human Services is required to staff and report to the Council.

/ **Child Support Advisory Council, Michigan**

Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support. Michigan established its Child Support Advisory Council as part of the Department of Health and Human Services' efforts to promote inclusion and equity in its programs (Michigan Department of Health and Human

Exhibit 1. Tiers of family engagement in North Carolina’s Child Welfare Family Leadership Model



Note: Exhibit 1 is a summary of information from the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services’ presentation to the Children’s Services Committee (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services 2019).

Services 2021). Council membership reflects the diverse intersectional experiences of people served by the Office of Child Support and includes custodial and noncustodial parents. The Council has been operating since February 2021. Since then, it has achieved several changes, including improved processes for handling child support program complaints and changes to the language the Office of Child Support uses to refer to people the program serves. The Child Support Advisory Council also elevated its role by increasing its awareness of initiatives and projects within the Office of Child Support and increasing the areas where Council members can provide input.

/ **Child Welfare Family Leadership Model, North Carolina Department of Human Services, Division of Social Services.** To gather program participant input, the North Carolina Department

of Health and Human Services, Division of Social Services partnered with county-level agencies in 2018 to create a multitier system of family leadership development. Through this system, parents and youth with firsthand experience in child welfare programs can partner in planning, implementing, and evaluating services by serving on committees or the Child Welfare Family Advisory Council (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services 2020).

The Family Leadership Model is in the state Department of Health and Human Services Child and Family Services Plan, in which the state describes its goals to expand local committees and codify the role of the Child Welfare Family Advisory Council in agency decision making (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services 2019). We describe the current program tiers in Exhibit 1.



5. Empowering families

Empowering approaches to family engagement shift influence and decision-making power to families, more so than the other types of approaches presented above. Empowering approaches provide families with final decision-making power in an area of need and enable them to select a strategy to respond to that need without input from program leaders and staff. We did not identify any human services programs that currently use empowering approaches along the IAP2 Spectrum to modify core program services or service delivery. This is not surprising, given the federal and local statutory and regulatory constraints faced by human services programs, including TANF and child support programs, and the pervasive emphasis on families' compliance with program rules.

Examples of empowering approaches include citizen juries, in which community members with lived experience gather input and alternatives from technical experts before making recommendations or decisions for solutions. Another example is participatory budgeting, in which a community or representatives from a community vote on how program funds are allocated. These approaches have been used rarely in the United States and infrequently internationally, and we did not find examples of these approaches in direct service contexts.

Designing family advisory boards for human services programs

Human services programs and agencies that want to develop an advisory board can look to the following toolkits and guidebooks to start the planning process and identify their readiness to convene an advisory board.

- [Tennessee Department of Children's Services, Community Advisory Board Toolkit](#)
- [A Guide to Forming Advisory Boards for Family-Serving Organizations](#)
- [Urban Institute's Tools and Resources for Project-Based Community Advisory Boards](#)

How do programs build trust with families as they gather and use their input?

In many human services programs, especially those like TANF and child support that have historically taken a punitive approach to noncompliance, families often do not have high levels of trust in the programs or program staff. This lack of trust can be a barrier to programs' ability to collect family input, especially if they hope to involve, collaborate with, or empower families. For example, custodial and noncustodial parents engaged with child support programs often navigate issues of trust between each other and with case managers, whose work is guided by strict procedures as they balance the demands of large caseloads. These conditions mean that collecting honest feedback from families likely requires intentional effort and time to build trust between program staff and the families they work with.

Practices for ensuring equity in gathering and using family input are similar to those for building trust with families. Below, we summarize common steps and considerations for building trust. We include examples from human services programs mentioned in the literature and from our consultations with programs, when available.

/ **Engage families early to ensure they are ready to provide input and to maximize potential benefits from the input.** When families are engaged and prepared to provide input early in an initiative or project, there are more opportunities for their input to inform decision making. Engaging families early can also allow time to build connections and relationships before asking for their input. For example, a Tribal TANF grant-reporting effort secured increased support and honest input while gathering participant stories because it first connected and built relationships with Tribal elders and other community members on a personal level (Keene et al. 2016).

/ **Adapt practices and commit resources to prepare families and staff for gathering family input.** Gathering input from children and



youth requires adaptations to account for the developmental needs and capabilities of youth, particularly when asking youth to provide direct input or collaborate directly with program staff and partners (UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent 2021). Gathering input from youth and family members who don't have previous experience communicating their personal experiences and perspectives requires additional support to ensure safe and trauma-informed interaction. During efforts to include current and former foster care youth in National Youth in Transition Database data collection planning, agencies provided a liaison for participants to prepare them, offer support, and debrief after all meetings (Children's Bureau 2020).

Programs have used similar practices with adult family members in other contexts, including:

- Making time for building human connections before asking sensitive questions and providing opportunities to process prior harm (Chicago Beyond 2019).
- Hosting pre-engagement meetings to prepare program and agency staff to respectfully meet with family member groups and set expectations (the Family Voice Council described this practice in our interview).
- Creating leadership pipelines that provide opportunities for families to learn about human services systems and build leadership skills, preparing them to provide input on larger systems-change collaborations (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services

2020; the Family Voice Council also described this practice in our interview).

Another example of adapting practices to build trust for family input is the Baltimore City Mayor's Office of Employment Development's work with the Baltimore Health Corps (see box below). This example highlights how the program built trust so participants could share honest feedback, which helped the program tailor services to each participant's needs. This approach to building trust applies to gathering family input for continuous improvement and tailoring individual services.

/ **Set clear expectations for the goals of engagement.** It is important to set clear expectations about what program changes are possible, given the complex interactions of program regulations, funding, and policy requirements. Share these parameters with families to ensure honest dialogue about what actions are and are not feasible (Falkenburger et al. 2018).



Baltimore Health Corps: Baltimore City Health Department, Mayor's Office of Employment Development

In summer 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Baltimore City Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED) and several partner organizations established the Baltimore Health Corps (BHC) initiative to hire and train unemployed city residents as temporary contact tracers. Integral to BHC's model were career navigators, staff who supported BHC's contact tracers in finding long-term sustainable employment.

Career navigators and other MOED staff who did not supervise contact tracers held weekly small-group sessions with contact tracers. The group established a safe space for ongoing dialogue in which contact tracers' supervisors were not present and participants directed the meeting agendas. Contact tracers shared work-related challenges, such as their paychecks and workload. This helped career navigators better understand contact tracers' career readiness and job search needs and tailor assistance accordingly.

/ **Take steps to show families their input is valuable—and so is their time and energy.**

Showing people that you value their time can come in several forms. For example, if programs want family members to join a focus group, programs can offer child care, travel stipends, or a meal, which lower barriers to participating. Programs might also compensate families for time spent providing feedback. The Office of Child Support Enforcement's [Starter Kit on Engaging People with Lived Experience in Child Support Programs](#) recommends ensuring that compensation for people with lived experience, including program participants, is comparable to the compensation of experts with valued experiences (Hinkle et al. 2022).

/ **Commit to a high quality feedback loop that includes closing the loop.** The initiative called Listen4Good developed a definition of a high quality feedback loop based on its work and research with direct service organizations. This definition includes "closing the loop" as an explicit step in gathering feedback and communicating the value of the input to families (Threlfall n.d.). A council member from the Family Voice Council in Colorado highlighted the importance of this step, indicating that the agency's commitment to closing the loop after all meetings and engagements with the Council was key to building trust between Council members and agency staff.

Building trust could benefit family engagement efforts by accomplishing the following:

/ **Increasing honest feedback about families' experiences in programs.** Trust between families and programs ensures that the information gathered to inform continuous improvement processes is based on families' true feelings and not just those they feel comfortable sharing.

"We don't know what we don't know, but we always think we know everything."

Child support practitioner, on why engaging families for feedback is important

"If you are going to ask for someone's feedback, you have to be willing to listen, and you have to take action on it. If you don't, participants won't see any value in giving you feedback. You have to be willing to accept the good, the bad, and the ugly."

TANF practitioner

/ **Increasing the likelihood that families will be prepared and willing to provide input and feedback in the future.** Programs can build long-term relationships with family members willing to support future projects or engagements by ensuring families leave interactions feeling respected and valued.

Further considerations for engaging families for their input

Human services programs, including TANF and child support programs, continuously seek to improve outcomes for the families they serve. Often, they do this through improvement processes that include collecting and analyzing administrative data and feedback from staff. Only sometimes do programs systematically and directly collect feedback from families to inform program improvement. Our review of the literature and our interviews with program leaders and practitioners revealed the following considerations for human services programs that wish to seek feedback from the families they serve:

/ Define the group of people you want input from and recognize the perspectives they bring. Programs might learn from current program participants, former program participants, eligible people who are not participants, community partner organizations, and more.

/ Identify what you want to learn from families and how you will use that information. Being clear about your goals will help you identify the right level of effort and will help you set clear expectations for staff and families.

- / Programs might engage families in different ways at different times—the approach to engaging families for feedback should vary depending on the goals and scale of the program improvement effort.
- / To close the feedback loop, follow up with families to share how you used the information. This feedback builds trust with families and reassures them that their time providing feedback was meaningful.
- / To effectively involve, collaborate with, and empower families in program improvement, programs should proactively build and maintain trust with families and provide the supports families need to fully and authentically participate in program improvement.
- / Be honest about how much influence and power you are willing and able to give the families you engage. Program administrators and staff must agree and communicate this clearly to families.
- / Engage families with humility and a willingness to accept the feedback they share.

Next steps for the Moving Forward: Furthering Family Input study

Informed by the knowledge development activities summarized here, the study team will collaborate with an Expert Workgroup to develop resources to support TANF and child support programs in planning for, collecting, and using family input to improve their programs. The Expert Workgroup includes people with lived experience; practitioners from TANF and child support programs; practitioners from other human services programs; and experts in equity, community engagement, and participatory methods. We will then partner with several TANF and child support programs to pilot and test the resources. We will revise the resources based on the feedback from the pilot tests. We will share the final set of family input resources publicly, likely in 2025.

Our approach for this brief

This report is based on our findings from two activities: a review of academic and nonacademic literature and interviews with human services programs currently gathering and using family input. For the literature scan, we identified relevant literature through targeted academic and grey literature internet searches using relevant keywords, and we reviewed federal, state, and local agency websites. We included literature recommended by federal agency staff and colleagues from our firm. We screened literature for review if it included a relevant definition for people being served by programs and if a relevant participant group provided some form of input. We prioritized literature that discussed gathering, using, or building trust with families for providing input in practice-based contexts and not solely for research purposes.

We also interviewed four human services programs about developing and implementing family input processes. These programs and their family input initiatives include the Colorado Department of Human Services, Family Voice Council; the Baltimore City Health Department, Mayor's Office of Employment Development, Baltimore Health Corps; the Clark County, Ohio, Department of Job and Family Services, Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program, Life in Transition Group; and the Quinault Indian Nation Tribal TANF Program.

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