

Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs

8: Integrating Family Input Throughout Program Improvement

If you have engaged families for feedback in the past, you might be looking for ways to engage them more deeply or formalize your approach, so that engaging families to improve programs becomes business as usual. This section includes considerations, tips, and tools that will help you routinely involve families throughout all phases of program improvement.

Planning to involve families in program improvement

As with all family engagement, start by reflecting on what you want to accomplish by getting input from families, how their input will feed into the program improvement process, and which approaches for gathering their input will work best for families. **To take your efforts to engage families deeper, program administrators and staff should prepare to provide families with greater access to decision makers and decision-making processes.** This will give families more opportunities to influence your program improvement efforts.

When planning how to involve families, consider:

- **Do you want to engage families for their feedback at key points or throughout your program improvement process?** Program staff and administrators make decisions at key points in the change process, including:
 - What problem to solve
 - What solution to implement
 - How to pilot test the solution
 - Whether to adopt, adapt, or abandon the solution after piloting

Families can provide input at all of these decision points—and more. Program administrators and staff should consider whether to include families’ feedback at all

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

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Social Services (DSS) partnered with county-level agencies to create a [graduated system of family leadership development](#). At each tier, activities build families’ skills and comfort with engaging with DSS staff and providing input on increasingly complex topics.¹ See [this brief](#) for more about North Carolina’s graduated levels of family engagement.



¹ North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. “[North Carolina Child Welfare Family Leadership Model](#).” 2019.

or only at some points in the process. If you want their input at only some points, when would it be most valuable?

Consider that the families your program serves might be eager for an opportunity to share what they view as challenges or opportunities for improvement, and they might identify problems that program staff were unaware of or had not yet considered. Families might also highlight challenges for which it is difficult to identify the root cause or to solve. Families might also suggest innovative solutions that program staff had not considered. Working with families as partners through the improvement process can yield helpful insights and ideas that can benefit the program and the families it serves.

- **Are you interested in engaging families over a short or long time period?** Your time frame for engaging families may largely depend on the scale of the changes you want to make and how long you expect the program improvement process to take. Relatively small improvements to program services or operations might be quick, whereas changes to policy, service delivery, or staff roles might take longer. Your time frame also depends on whether you intend to engage families throughout the process, or just at some key decision points.
- **How ready are families to provide a deeper level of input?** Families need support to engage in program improvement. In addition to supports such as compensation, scheduling activities at convenient times and providing child care, and creating a safe environment in which to provide feedback, families may need additional knowledge and skill development. Program staff and administrators might need to build families' comfort with engaging in dialogue about program changes with program staff. This is especially important if families do not have previous experience working with staff in improvement efforts.

- **Build families' knowledge about the program.** TANF cash assistance and child support programs are complex, riddled with jargon, and evolving. Families who have experience with the program may have some knowledge about the structure, limitations, incentives, and oversight, but often that "knowledge" may be based on word of mouth or non-representative interactions and some "myth-busting" may be needed to facilitate their engagement. Those who are not as familiar may need program administrators and staff to explain where there is flexibility to make changes and where there are constraints that need to be taken into consideration.

As a starting point, consider the selected program features included on the [TANF two-pager](#) and [child support two-pager included in Section 10](#). These program primers for families include examples of information that could help families deepen their understanding of the program, including their areas of flexibility and limitations.

- **Build families' skills to lead, advocate, and communicate.** Family members can develop leadership and advocacy skills as they participate in program improvement efforts, including how to tell their story, how to speak to different audiences, and how to read and interpret policy. Families may need support to build these skills, and local family or community leadership or advocacy programs may be available to help in this process.

For example, the [National Parent Leadership Institute](#) partners with public agencies and state, local, and Tribal governments to provide free classes to families on civic skills, communication, and leadership.

- **How ready are program staff to involve families?** Involving families in program improvement means giving families space to weigh in on questions and conversations that they were not part of in the

past. It can be challenging for some program administrators and staff to hear about how programs have harmed families or have not met their needs. Conversations with families about program improvement requires administrators and staff to be ready to acknowledge areas for improvement without getting defensive. Administrators and staff who work with families through the program improvement process should understand how to engage families with humility, respect, and consideration of families' needs. In short, these conversations need to take place in the spirit of learning and improving together.

Program Administrators and Staff: Engage families in meaningful and thoughtful ways²

1. Involve families early in the program improvement process so they can influence the work, rather than react to work that is nearly complete.
2. Program staff should be open to what families might share and seek to act on families' ideas or explain why they cannot act on families' ideas.
3. Compensate families for their time.
4. Use language that families can understand.
5. Plan engagement activities or meetings so that families can easily attend. This may include providing childcare or supporting families with childcare expenses.
6. Develop with families the norms that the group will follow to communicate with one another; this allows families to identify what they need to feel comfortable speaking up.
7. Be aware of retraumatizing or tokenizing families by only asking them to share their stories without giving them a way to impact decisions.

Resources to prepare program administrators and staff to involve families in program improvement

- [The Office of Child Support Enforcement's Starter Kit on Engaging People with Lived Experience in Child Support Programs](#). This short guide can help program staff identify and recruit, equitably compensate, and effectively and respectfully engage people with lived experience.
- [Methods and Emerging Strategies to Engage People with Lived Experience](#). This brief includes tips on providing the appropriate infrastructure and resources to engage people with lived experience, how to prioritize equity and access, and thoughtful engagement practices.
- [Meaningful Parent Leadership: Building Effective Parent/Practitioner Collaboration](#). This practical guidebook for parents and practitioners details how to build cross-cultural, inclusive relationships, recruit and train parent leaders, and prepare staff for partnering with parent leaders.

² Skelton-Wilson, S., M. Sandoval-Lunn, X. Zhang, F. Stern, and J. Kendall. "[Methods and Emerging Strategies to Engage People with Lived Experience: Improving Federal Research, Policy, and Practice](#)." 2021.

Involving families in program improvement

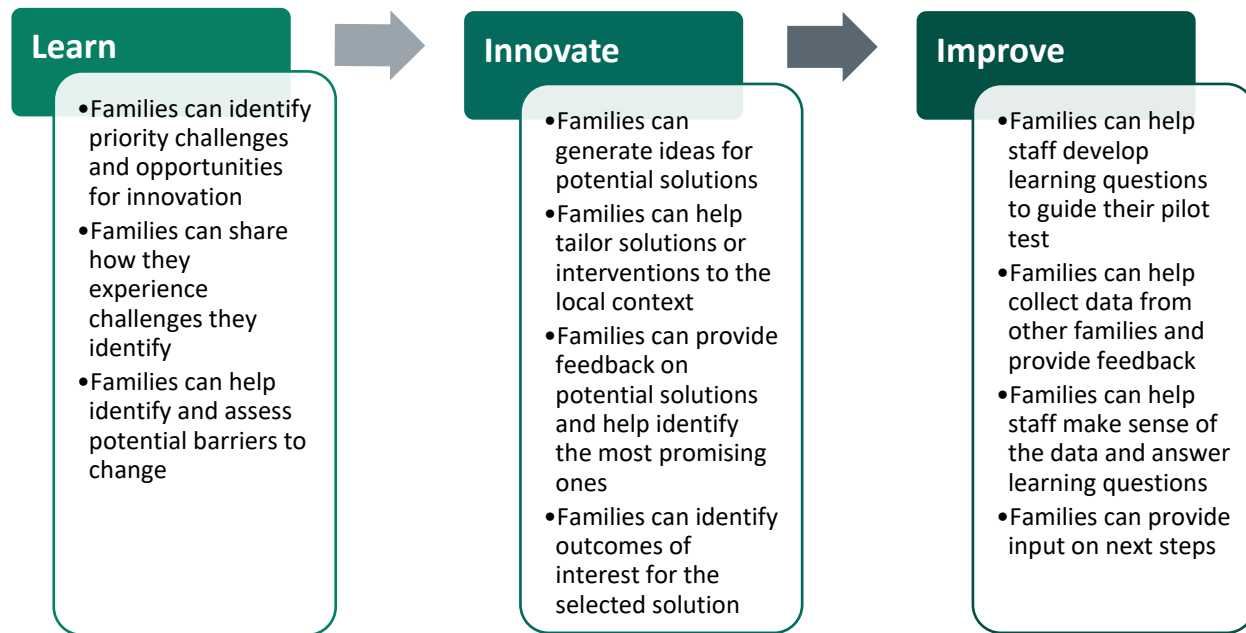
Involving families in your program improvement process means that you want families to actively shape the change you want to make. By giving families access to decision-making discussions and a role in informing those decisions, you are engaging them more deeply than when you simply ask for their feedback on a decision that your program has already made.

Your approach to involving families will likely vary depending on whether you want to engage them at some decision points or continually through the program improvement process—that is, at all or most decision points. If you have experience involving families at a few decision points, you can build up to regularly involving them in all or most decision points.

- Involving families in a few decision points.** If program administrators and staff are less experienced with engaging families in program improvement, it may make sense to start by involving families intermittently through the improvement process. Because this approach gives families less access to the change process, it is especially important for administrators and staff to consider *where* in the process they will involve families, and *what input* you will ask families to provide. Exhibit 8.2 shows how program staff might involve families through the phases of a program improvement cycle. The [Engaging Families in a Program Improvement Process graphic in Section 10](#) shows how involving families might look different than consulting or collaborating with them.



Exhibit 8.2. Involving families in each phase of the program improvement cycle³



- Involving families in all or most decision points.** Similar to having a consistent set of staff on an implementation team to lead the program improvement process, it can be valuable to involve the same group of families through an improvement process. Families might weigh in at all or most of the opportunities shown in Exhibit 8.2. Continual involvement can help build families’ understanding of the problems you are trying to solve, the program, and the improvement process. It can also build

³ We use the [Learn, Innovate, Improve process](#) in this example, but the suggested ways to involve families applies to other program improvement frameworks, including [Plan, Do, Study, Act](#) and [Breakthrough Series Collaborative](#).

families' trust in the program, buy-in for changes, and comfort with participating in program improvement discussions.

Involving families throughout the program improvement process

Depending on your intended time frame for involving families, you can consider establishing a short-term work group or committee or a longer-term or permanent advisory council.

- **Work groups or committees** can include only families, only staff, or a mix of families and staff. When families and staff are part of the same work group, program staff should consider the power dynamics and actively use strategies to strengthen families' voices so that all work group members' voices are treated as equally valuable.⁴ Work groups typically focus on a single problem or small set of related problems in program improvement. As a result, once the problems are resolved through the improvement process, the work group might disband.

Involving a work group in pilot testing a new service in TANF

Clark County, Ohio, Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program⁵

During the COVID-19 pandemic, program staff learned that participants wanted a voluntary peer support group as a way to connect with other participants virtually. **To design, plan, and run a pilot test of the peer support group, program staff assembled a work group including participants and staff.**

The work group met regularly to plan how to structure the peer support group and how to collect feedback during the pilot test. **Program participants from the work group led the peer support group and helped collect and analyze feedback during the pilot test—and they were compensated for their time** and their time counted as an internship.

One work group participant is now employed by the program and said that the work group helped her develop planning and leadership skills.

- **Advisory councils** are typically made up of families. Although mixed membership, where other community members or program staff are also members, is possible, it is not recommended to only include a few families on a council or board to serve as the "voice" of families.⁶ Councils are usually established with the expectation of being long-term or permanent. As a result, they might have more formal recruitment processes for members and program administrators, and staff might pay more attention to the composition of council or board, to ensure that members are representative of the families the program serves. Their processes or ways of working may also be formally defined.

Advisory councils can have varying degrees of power and influence in decision making related to program improvement. To learn more about how to develop and support a family advisory council that collaborates with program staff and has considerable influence on decision making, see Section 9: Sharing Power with Families to Drive Continuous Improvement.

For guidance and tips on establishing an advisory board, explore [A Guide to Forming Advisory Boards for Family-Serving Organizations](#).



⁴ National Child Traumatic Stress Network. "A Guide to Forming Advisory Boards for Family-Serving Organizations." 2019.

⁵ Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse. "Clark County Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program's (CCMEP's) Life in Transition (LIT) Remote Support Group for Youth at OhioMeansJobs." 2022.

⁶ National Child Traumatic Stress Network. "A Guide to Forming Advisory Boards for Family-Serving Organizations." 2019.

Exhibit 8.3 describes what TANF and child support program staff might need to consider about starting advisory boards.

Exhibit 8.3. Considerations for TANF and child support programs establishing an advisory council

	TANF	Child Support
Potential purpose	Review program policies and grant programs ⁷ or ways to increase participation and engagement	Review and refine order establishment and enforcement approaches
Potential members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single-parent and two-parent families • Child-only families • Families receiving assistance funded entirely with state Maintenance of Effort (MOE) funds (for example, families receiving extended TANF) • Families with previous involvement with the TANF program (for example, those who gained employment and became ineligible for benefits, reached a benefit time limit, or whose benefits were terminated through a sanction) • Include perspectives from all types of cases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents who pay child support • Parents who receive child support • Other family members who care for children served by child support • Parents with previous involvement with the child support program • Include people with a wide variety of experiences with the program⁸
Supporting families’ participation	Allow council members to remain on the council after they reach the program time limit or leave the program after successfully gaining new employment, with reasonable council term limits. Potential members may be more willing to join the council and share their experiences if their participation does not depend on the status of their case.	Allow time to address and resolve individual case issues for council members before beginning to gather their feedback on larger systems-level issues. This will improve council members’ readiness to engage on new issues and topics.

In the box on the following page, we share an example from the Michigan Office of Child Support and its work with the Child Support Community Advisory Council.

Going Deeper: Moving toward families driving solutions and decisions

If you and your program are getting more comfortable engaging families throughout the improvement process, you have an opportunity to begin to share decision-making power with families. In Section 9: Sharing Power with Families to Drive Continuous Improvement, we provide tips, tools, and guidance for program administrators and staff who are ready to deeply engage families throughout program improvement.

⁷ Tennessee Department of Human Services. “Families First Community Advisory Board.” 2022.

⁸ Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. “Office of Child Support Community Advisory Council Charter.” 2022.

Involving an advisory council in child support program improvement

Michigan's Child Support Community Advisory Council

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support **created the Community Advisory Council with the goal of involving members of the program community in decision-making processes.** Specifically, they aim to elevate the voices of individuals underrepresented in feedback for program improvement but overrepresented in the use of services.

With facilitation, planning, and scheduling support from program staff, the **Council sets its own agenda and determines which topics it would like to address.** Program staff provide quarterly updates on upcoming decisions, continuous improvement efforts, and areas that may benefit from family insights. The Council determines to what extent it wishes to be engaged and about which topics.

The first six months of Council meetings focused on providing members with foundational knowledge about policies and key actors influencing the child support system in Michigan. Families also had time to voice and process their personal experiences before turning to larger program improvement issues.

Two examples of topics the Council has recently addressed are:

- **The terminology the program uses for the families it serves in its public communications.** The Council decided to drop the term *customer* and instead refer to individuals being served by the program as *participants*. Council members believed *participants* describes their interaction with the child support system more accurately.
- **The need for a responsive and streamlined participant complaint system.** The existing system required participants to go to different agencies in the child support system to have their issues addressed. Because of this recommendation, the program revamped its processes and developed training to empower and tools to support case managers to respond directly to participants' issues right away.

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