

Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs

3: Why Engage Families in Your Program Improvement Efforts?

As economic conditions, families' needs, technologies, program regulations, and service environments change, administrators and staff look for ways to continuously improve their programs. **No matter the motivation for the change**—whether improving families' or program outcomes, improving the experience of families involved in the program, or simply responding to funding directives—**families can play an invaluable role in shaping program improvements**. Families that participate in TANF cash assistance and child support programs have firsthand experience that program staff can learn from. Ultimately, engaging families is essential if you want to understand how to better serve families and improve the experience of families that your program will serve in the future.

Benefits of engaging families to improve programs include the following:

- **Supports program staff in fulfilling the mission of TANF and child support programs and taps into their intrinsic motivation to help families.** Program staff want to help families achieve their economic goals, support themselves, tap into their motivation and aspirations, and ensure the well-being of their children. However, historically, the TANF and child support programs' rules, policies, and processes have created program environments in which staff must employ punitive approaches with families who do not comply with program requirements. In many cases, this has eroded trust with families. Engaging families in program improvement can help program staff rebuild or forge trust with families and offers opportunities to make changes to programs based on families' feedback. By demonstrating respect for families in this way and centering programs on families' needs, programs can support positive organizational culture and experiences for families¹ and can allow program staff to feel more connected to why they started working in human services.
- **Takes the guesswork out of making program changes to improve family outcomes.** Ideas for program improvement that are disconnected from the experiences or needs of families the program serves or the reality of service delivery can be difficult to implement and costly. Families know what they need and, if they trust the program and are given the opportunity, can provide a vision and concrete suggestions for program services and policies that are responsive to their interests and needs. This allows program administrators and staff to identify ways to target limited resources on services that families will value and use, which are more likely to help families achieve their economic and well-being goals.

Program Administrators: Set a clear family engagement vision

Ultimately, program administrators need to clearly articulate to their staff the value of engaging families in improving the program. The reasons may vary across programs, but they should resonate with program staff and align with leadership's vision and priorities.

Engaging families in program improvement or attempting to sustain efforts to engage families will be difficult without explicit and material support from leadership.

¹ Gaffney, A., and R. Webster. "[Promoting a Positive Organizational Culture in TANF Offices: Final Report.](#)" 2021.

- **Helps programs address equity issues.** Elevating families' voices in program improvement can help identify and address inequities created or exacerbated by program service delivery, culture, operations, processes, and policy. Hearing directly from families about their needs can challenge deep-rooted assumptions about individuals seeking support.² As we describe in Sections 8 and 9, deeper family engagement approaches can also help build the social capital and skills of family members who participate by providing them with opportunities to learn advocacy and leadership skills.

TANF and child support programs have support for engaging families in program improvement.

Child support and Tribal child support programs:

- Over the last 10 years, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) has encouraged agencies to adopt more family-centered child support practices and policies. For example, the [2016 Final Rule on Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization in Child Support Enforcement Programs](#) provided greater flexibility to better serve and center families' needs.
- More recently, in 2022 OCSE released a [toolkit to help child support professionals engage people with lived experience](#) in the child support program.
- As sovereign entities, Tribal child support programs have added flexibility that allow them to ensure their programs align with tribal laws and practices. For example, unlike state programs, tribal child support programs may accept in-kind payments from parents instead of cash to meet support obligations.³

TANF and Tribal TANF programs:

- The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) has encouraged agencies to take advantage of the flexibility provided to states in designing their TANF cash assistance programs to pursue innovation and engage families in the process.
- Tribal TANF agencies already have considerable flexibility in developing and administering their programs,⁴ and have used it to infuse tribal culture and indigenous ways of knowing in program design⁵

² Coleman, A. "[Reimagining Our Approach to Research to Advance Racial Equity](#)." 2021.

³ Office of Child Support Enforcement. "Tribal and State Jurisdiction to Establish and Enforce Child Support." 2007.

⁴ Office of Family Assistance. "[Q & A: Tribal TANF](#)." 2013.

⁵ Hahn, H., O. Healy, W. Hillbrant, and C. Narducci. "[A Descriptive Study of Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy \(TANF\) Programs](#)." 2013.

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