

# Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs

## 5: Building and Maintaining Trust With Families

Families often do not have high levels of trust in TANF cash assistance or child support programs or program staff, especially when families who do not comply with strict program rules risk losing benefits or facing legal consequences. This lack of trust can be a barrier to your program’s ability to collect family input, especially if you hope to use approaches that involve, consult, collaborate with, or empower families.

Acknowledging and creating space for families to share their experiences helps families feel heard and valued.

Trust building can increase the benefits of family engagement by:

- **Increasing honest feedback about families’ experiences in programs.** Building trust helps ensure that the information families share to inform program improvement is genuine. Without trust, families may feel pressure to only share positive feedback or what they think program staff want to hear.
- **Increasing the pool of families who are prepared and willing to provide input and feedback in the future.** You can build long-term relationships with family members who are willing to support future program improvement efforts by ensuring families leave engagements feeling respected and valued.

### Prerequisites to building trust with families

For family members to feel safe enough to share their honest feedback and their needs, program administrators and staff should **acknowledge and address the harm that families may have experienced** from interactions with the program and should ensure safe environments for families to provide input.

Program administrators and staff can do this in the following ways:

- Make space for family members to confidentially share their experiences in the program.
- Be open to hearing about negative experiences without making excuses.
- Acknowledge how the program policies, enforced by program staff, may have worked against or disrespected the family’s goals, values, and/or needs.
- Acknowledge that program staff might not have always respected the decisions that families made or wanted to make.

### Program Administrators: Reinforce the importance of trust

Encourage staff by reinforcing that building trust with families is not only already part of their job, but will likely make their jobs easier. For example, case managers who have trusting relationships with families might spend less time on outreach to the participants they serve than case managers who have not built trust with families on their caseload.

Approaching families with an authentic desire to understand their experiences, and respecting what they share and the time they spend sharing, can help program staff to rebuild or forge trusting relationships with them.

## Understand and respect the cultures & contexts of the families you serve

Building trust with families also begins with understanding and respecting the cultures of the families you serve (often referred to as cultural competency). Developing cultural competency of the communities you serve improves communication with families and helps program staff and programs function more effectively.<sup>1</sup> To learn more, check out this [quick guide for improving cultural competence](#).

Program staff and administrators might consider taking time to deepen their understanding of communities by asking questions, listening, practicing deep self-reflection, and proactively learning about the communities’ cultures. Program staff and administrators can reflect on the following questions to prompt genuine engagement with families:<sup>2</sup>

- What are our goals for engaging families?
- What do we have to offer families in return for their efforts?
- Which families or community members could contribute the most?
- How can we ensure families feel heard and valued?

Program staff and administrators might also seek to better understand how poverty and trauma affect the families you serve. Families living in poverty are more likely to experience trauma and less likely to be able to access the resources they need to process that trauma. Trauma can impact decision-making, parenting practices, interpersonal relationships, and more.<sup>3</sup> Although no family’s personal circumstances and trauma related to poverty are the same, it might be easier for program staff to build trusting relationships with families when they understand how poverty and trauma can affect how family members interact with program staff.

### Take steps to understand the cultures of the families you serve

You likely work with families from various backgrounds, including those different from your own. Seek to understand what it means to work with culturally diverse families and to find ways to embed those cultures in service delivery. To better understand how to work with families from different cultures, check out [this tip sheet](#). For Tribal program staff or staff working in Indigenous communities, check out [this toolkit](#).

Programs could also consider providing culturally responsive training or coaching to staff.

To deepen your understanding of how you might coach families in a culturally responsive way, check out [this brief](#).



### Tips for building mutual trust with families

**TANF:** Inform and remind families that their cash assistance will not be negatively affected by whether they share feedback or what they share.

**Child support:** Inform and remind families that their case and case actions will not be negatively affected by their honest feedback.

**Note:** Acting quickly on feedback about unfair or improper treatment is also important to build trust.

<sup>1</sup> National Prevention Information Network. “[Cultural Competence in Health and Human Services](#).” 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Sankofa, J., H. Daly, and E. Falkenburger. “[Community Voice and Power Sharing Guidebook](#).” 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Collins, K., et al. “[Understanding the Impact of Trauma and Urban Poverty on Family Systems: Risks, Resilience, and Interventions](#).” 2010.

## Best practices for building and maintaining trust with families

The following are practices that can help program administrators and staff build and maintain trust with families. In addition, program administrators and staff might consider working with families to learn what they need to repair, build, or maintain trust. Families can provide valuable insight into whether and how trust has been eroded in the past and what they need to re-establish trust with the program.



**Engage families early to ensure they are ready to provide input and to give them more chances to shape how the program improves.** 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 throughout the program improvement effort. Engaging families early can also provide time to build connections and relationships before asking them for input.



**Adapt practices and commit resources to prepare families and staff for gathering family input.** Family members that have not previously had the opportunity to communicate their personal experiences and perspectives may need additional support. For example, consider the following:

- Making time for building human connections before asking sensitive questions and providing opportunities to process prior harm.<sup>4</sup>
- Hosting pre-engagement meetings to prepare program staff to respectfully meet with family member groups and set expectations.<sup>5</sup>
- Establishing family leadership pipelines that provide opportunities for family members to learn about program systems and build leadership skills, which can prepare them for opportunities to provide input on larger systems-change collaborations.<sup>6</sup>



**Set and communicate clear expectations for the goals of engagement.** It is important to set clear expectations about what changes can be made to the program 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.<sup>7</sup>

### Tips for compensating families for their time providing input

- Compensate families directly with an hourly rate (for ongoing activities) or fixed rate (for one-time or intermittent activities).\*
- Provide gift cards to families for participating.
- Count families' time toward participation requirements, if possible (TANF programs).

\* Without an income disregard written into policy, this income will count and could threaten families' benefits. Programs should consider establishing an income disregard for families who are compensated for contributing to program improvement.

Programs might also consider providing financial coaching to families participating in program improvement efforts to help them navigate potential benefit cliff effects.

<sup>4</sup> Chicago Beyond. "[Why Am I Always Being Researched?](#)" 2019.

<sup>5</sup> The Colorado Department of Human Services Family Voice Council described this practice in a March 2022 interview with the study team.

<sup>6</sup> North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. "[North Carolina Child Welfare Family Leadership Model.](#)" 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Falkenburger, E., N. Hakizimana, E. Megibow, and E. Harrison. "[Promoting Adolescent Sexual health and Safety, a Community-Based Collaboration.](#)" 2021.



**Approach families with humility. Be willing to hear negative feedback.** Families' feedback might reveal new, deep, or unanticipated challenges. Demonstrating curiosity and interest in understanding families' experiences signals that a program is open to change. Avoiding casting blame or making excuses signals to families that a program is ready to start tackling the challenge.



**Take steps to show families you value their input, as well as their time and energy.** For example, if you want family members to join a focus group, you could offer resources such as child care, travel stipends, or a meal, which lower barriers to participating. You might also offer compensation for the time families spend providing feedback. The federal [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 what other experts with valued experiences receive for their time (see text box above for more tips).<sup>8</sup>



**Commit to a high-quality feedback loop that includes closing the loop.** Informing families how you used their input, or "closing the loop," should be an explicit step in gathering feedback and communicating the value of input to families.<sup>9</sup> For the [Colorado Department of Human Services Family Voice Council](#), 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. This is discussed further in Section 9.



**Align your words and actions.** If you say that you value families' input, demonstrate that you value it by compensating family members for sharing feedback, respect their time, and act on their feedback. If you say that families can share their experiences without affecting their benefits, ensure there is no impact on their benefits. Families trust actions more than words.

### Want to know more about how TANF, Tribal TANF, child support, and other human services programs have built and maintained trust with families?



Check out this brief: [Gathering and Using Family Input to Improve Child Support and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Services: Approaches from the Human Services Field](#)

<sup>8</sup> Hinkle, E., J. R. Kendall, M. Sandoval-Lunn, F. Stern, and J. Donier. "A Starter Kit On Engaging People With Lived Experience In Child Support Programs." 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Stanford Social Innovation Review. "Tools and Lessons to Make Listening to Clients Feasible." N.d.

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