

Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs

7: Getting Started on Gathering and Using Family Input

As you consider whether to gather and use family input and feedback as part of your program’s continuous improvement processes, it may feel overwhelming to identify the best way to get started. This section includes discussion questions to help clarify your needs along with tools and resources you can use to help identify and integrate family input strategies and activities.

Planning to consult with families

One of the most important factors in selecting the appropriate technique to gather input and feedback from families is to **prioritize an approach that works best for the people you want to hear from.**

Taking the time to **reflect on why you want to gather input from families and what you hope to address with their insights** is an important first step. Consider:

- **Who is most affected?** Program staff and administrators will want to make sure that the techniques or approaches they select for gathering family input will help them reach people who are likely to be affected by the policy, process, or budget decision program staff are interested in improving or changing. For example, if you are unsure who may be affected by the change, then you will want to select an approach that incorporates voices from a large variety of families and family circumstances.
- **Which family voices have we not heard?** Your program may already collect input from some families through existing processes or through the experiences of staff with lived experience with TANF cash assistance or child support. Program administrators and program staff may find this type of input helpful, but basing program decisions on the perspectives of only a small number of family experiences may lead to costly and time-consuming changes that do not have the intended effect for all families. Consider approaches that build on these existing sources of information by specifically focusing on reaching out to people who are not represented in these reflections.
- **What do families need to be able to contribute to the questions and issues we want their input on?** Continuous program improvement efforts are often complex and might require deep knowledge of federal regulations and other program constraints. Take the time to reflect on the knowledge

Program Administrators: Hearing the perspectives of diverse communities requires diverse approaches

A single approach for gathering family input for your program is unlikely to capture the voices of all the families you want to hear from. Program administrators should consider encouraging and supporting program staff to use more than one technique or approach to reach the wide variety of communities and diverse perspectives within communities of families who are eligible for services through TANF and child support programs.

Tip for TANF Program Staff

Consider reaching out to people who are no longer receiving TANF benefits. Families who stop receiving services or benefits before reaching their self-sufficiency goals can provide perspectives on barriers to success that families currently participating in TANF might not share.

required for families to provide input and feedback on the possible implications of a policy, practice, or budget change you are considering.

Some engagement approaches may include providing families with accessible background information about the program to allow them to provide substantive feedback, whereas others focus on hearing families' natural reactions to possible changes without providing background information about the program. For example, it may be helpful to provide family members with an overview of reporting requirements from program funders before gathering family input on changes to application forms for services.

What if you don't know how to reach families you want to hear from?

You and your program team do not need to make new connections with communities of families on your own. We recommend building connections with community groups, faith communities, ethnic community-based organizations, and other service providers that engage families who might be eligible for or are receiving services at your program to support outreach. Although you can make new connections with families on your own, you may find that you have more success in building trusting relationships with families using these trusted community resources.

You can begin building new connections with community-based organizations by sharing information about the services your program provides and asking to learn more about the organization's work and who they aim to serve. These organizations or people from the community can serve as "engagement liaisons"¹ who may be able and willing to:

- Facilitate new connections for program staff to reach out to families and gather input.
- Co-lead engagements to gather input from families and help build trust between program staff and families.
- Lead engagements to gather and communicate family feedback to program staff if families have a stronger affiliation with that community group than your program. This is particularly important for communities with concerns about documentation status and interactions with government in general.²

If you decide to build new connections with families without support from community groups, consider the appropriate time, setting, and context for making these new connections. These can be nuanced and specific to the communities your program serves, so you may also want to consider partnering with other programs or agencies with experience engaging the specific families you hope to connect with. Be mindful of families' circumstances before outreaching to them to participate in program improvement. Families experiencing a crisis or who have not had their immediate needs met through the services your program and partner programs provide may not be receptive to requests for feedback. It may also deepen their distrust in the program if it seems like staff are unaware of or indifferent to their situation and needs.

In the box below, we share an example from the San Francisco Department of Child Support Services and its work to build connections with families by developing relationships with external community partners.

¹ Nelson, J., and L. Brooks. (2016). "[Racial Equity Toolkit: An Opportunity to Operationalize Equity. Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race & Equity.](#)" 2016.

² Nelson, J., and L. Brooks. (2016). "[Racial Equity Toolkit: An Opportunity to Operationalize Equity. Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race & Equity.](#)" 2016.

Building relationships with community-based organizations to improve trust and better meet family needs

City and County of San Francisco Department of Child Support Services

Over the last decade, the San Francisco Department of Child Support Services (SF DCSS) has built deep connections with local community-based organizations (CBOs) to: (1) increase the participation of eligible families in the child support program, particularly among those who are skeptical of the program; and (2) to advance a holistic approach to service delivery to better meet families' needs.

SF DCSS leadership built new relationships with many of the city and county's CBOs, including those providing formal and informal services, advocacy groups, and community gathering places, such as churches. **The agency provides time and incentives for staff to serve as program ambassadors to CBOs**, who serve as the CBOs' primary points of contact. At a minimum, ambassadors conduct quarterly check-ins with partner organizations. Information gathered about CBOs is combined in an internal site for staff to reference and CBO partners are often asked to provide presentations to SF DCSS staff on the services they provide.

When program staff make connections with new CBOs, staff and the CBO host a joint meeting in which each present their work. This helps **staff at both organizations understand the services they offer to families and identify ways in which the relationship can be mutually beneficial**.

Many of SF DCSS' relationships with CBOs are informal, but some relationships are formalized through memoranda of understanding. Others involve deeper partnerships through co-location of child support services, for which child support staff are on site to meet with families.

Through the development and maintenance of these relationships, program staff have learned that:

- **Families involved with the child support program are heavily represented not only among CBO clients but also CBO staff.** This has led to deep, honest conversations with CBO staff, who share their own experiences and concerns with the child support program. These conversations have been critical in developing these partnerships.
- **CBOs have served as helpful partners for SF DCSS in pilot testing new services or other program changes.** Many pilot tests involve partnering with CBOs that serve the types of families or communities that a new service or program change would affect. During pilot testing, program staff often gather feedback from the CBO and conduct in-depth interviews with families about the new service or program change and whether the pilot change should be scaled up more broadly.

SF DCSS provides time for staff to identify and directly support families in resolving issues that affect their child support case, including those that may not traditionally be the responsibility of SF DCSS to resolve. Resolving these issues often requires staff to work with other government service programs across the city and county, as well as CBOs.

Tools and resources to help program staff and administrators prepare to consult families


- [Identifying the Right Family Engagement Approach for Your Program's Goals](#) (located in Section 10). This resource will help you connect what you want to learn from families for continuous improvement to potential approaches and activities for gathering their input. One or more of these approaches can be used to meet the needs of your program and interests and capacity of families.
- [Beyond Inclusion: Equity for Public Engagement](#). This resource provides key principles to help you develop equitable inclusion of diverse voices for community engagement work aimed at informing decision-making processes.
- [Person-Centered Language – Practice Tool](#). This resource describes how to use language that centers families and recognizes their dignity and strengths. Using appropriate language for outreach and communication is a key step as you plan to gather input from families.

Consulting with families to include their voice in program processes and policies

Each approach to gathering input from families to inform program improvement has strengths and limitations (described in Exhibit 7.1). There is no single engagement approach (a setting for gathering input) or activity (a specific technique for gathering input) that outranks another. Using more than one approach can help you mitigate the limitations of a single approach. When selecting the most appropriate approaches for your program, consider:

- How different approaches impact what you may learn from families
- What different activities require in terms of staff and families' time, resources, and skills

Approaches and activities to gather input from families

Consider the approaches and activities below as you plan to gather input from families. The descriptions below are brief, so you will want to review considerations for costs; time required to prepare, gather, and interpret family input; staff capacity; and other factors. [Section 10: Family Input Toolbox](#) includes a variety of additional resources for supporting you and your team as you start using one of the approaches described in this section. 



 **Surveys.** Surveys can be given to families in different formats and settings and can include a variety of types of questions for families to describe their experiences. They can be administered face-to-face, by phone, by mail, by email or a web-based platform, or as a paper handout. Surveys are particularly helpful for hearing from many families when you have specific questions you would like to ask. They can include open-ended questions where families can respond to questions using their own words and closed-ended questions where families select from a set of response options. Surveys do not provide opportunities for families to build relationships with program staff, ask questions, or provide feedback on questions that the survey does not ask. See Section 10 for a [brief guide on survey tips and an example survey](#) for TANF and child support programs that should be helpful in getting started. 

Exhibit 7.1. Potential approaches and activities for program staff to gather family input

Survey	Individual or family interviews	Focus groups or group interviews	Family forums or listening sessions	Direct feedback to decision makers	Visual or other nonwritten feedback
<p>Helpful when: Families may have different experiences or perspectives and programs want to get a better sense of who is affected; or when anonymity may be important to families.</p>	<p>Helpful when: Families may have nuanced and complex feedback that requires more staff time or attention to hear.</p>	<p>Helpful when: Families may be able to build on each other's experiences to provide feedback and staff capacity for individual interviews are limited.</p>	<p>Helpful when: Families may have information on issues or concerns that program staff are not yet aware of.</p>	<p>Helpful when: Families would like to communicate their feedback directly to leaders or leaders want to hear from families directly.</p>	<p>Helpful when: Families you want to hear from prefer to communicate in a nontraditional format.</p>
<p>Limitations: Families generally not able to provide details on their experiences or feedback that is not requested in survey questions.</p>	<p>Limitations: Program staff may need to conduct many interviews to develop an understanding of an issue from the perspective of all of the families being served.</p>	<p>Limitations: Families may not be comfortable sharing their personal stories and perspectives in group settings.</p>	<p>Limitations: Program staff will not be able to ask in-depth questions about issues raised, so additional approaches may be necessary.</p>	<p>Limitations: Families and their stories may be tokenized or may not represent the experiences of other families.</p>	<p>Limitations: Staff may need training and additional time to familiarize themselves with visual or nonwritten feedback.</p>



Individual or family interviews. Interviews can be hosted in whatever setting is most comfortable for families. They can be based on focused interview questions, such as asking for feedback on a specific process, or broad questions that allow families to provide input on topics that program staff may not have considered. Interviews also provide great flexibility for program staff to ask direct questions of families and for families to ask questions of program staff. Program staff will need to balance asking questions of interest with family readiness to share their experiences. This [Office of Population Affairs \(OPA\) Interviewing Tip Sheet](#) provides helpful guidance on preparing for, conducting, and using the results from interviews.



Focus groups or group interviews. Focus groups are group interviews with one or more members of several different families where each person can provide input at the same time. They can provide an opportunity for families to make new connections with each other by contrasting, building on, and supporting each other's stories. Some families may not be comfortable with sharing their sensitive personal stories in group settings, so it is important to make sure families are aware of what to expect before participating. Not all family contributions in focus groups are equal—family members who are less prepared to share their story may not speak up. We strongly recommend that staff who facilitate focus groups participate in facilitation training or that they have experience with facilitation to make sure both program goals and family needs are met.

In Section 10, you can find a [brief guide on how to conduct focus groups and an example focus group discussion guide](#) for TANF and child support programs, which should be helpful in getting started.



Family forums or listening sessions.

Family forums or listening sessions are larger, often open-invitation gatherings of families that can employ a variety of activities for gathering input. Family forums are helpful if program administrators and staff are looking to learn about issues or concerns that impact the broader community of families. Program staff will want to plan for follow-up family input engagements to learn more about issues and to build out and validate ideas generated by families in forums and listening sessions. To learn more about listening sessions, review the [OPA Youth Listening Session Toolkit](#), which provides templates, planning documents, and worksheets for conducting a targeted listening session. Although these resources are designed with youth in mind, they can also be helpful for engaging adults.



Direct feedback to decision makers.

With this approach, families speak directly to program staff and leadership overseeing continuous improvement work. Activities might include families speaking at legislative or other public events or speaking at program staff meetings and committees. It can be empowering to families to directly tell their story to decision-making groups, if they are well supported and these groups are ready to hear their feedback. However, it could be tokenizing for families if program staff provide these speaking opportunities to families but administrators do not intend to act based on what they hear. Remember that the individual family experiences shared through this approach are important but may not reflect the experiences of all

Program Staff:

Tips for conducting cross-cultural interviews^{3,4,5}

In addition to designing interviews with culturally appropriate questions, program staff should consider additional steps to acknowledge and respect families and their culture.

- Interviewers should reflect on participant cultural backgrounds and identity in relation to their own as they prepare for conducting interviews. Some cultures hold beliefs that that may influence the building of rapport and openness to providing feedback during an interview.
- Work with interpreters to allow for live communication in the language in which families are most comfortable communicating. Interpretation should be available for the languages and dialects used by the community where interviewers are working.
- If you are new to gathering input from families, or believe families may have concerns about providing feedback to program staff, consider working with staff from trusted community organizations or contracting with someone from outside of the program to collect families' input.
- Cultural definitions of family are important and may differ greatly from program definitions, so consider using language that respects cultural norms when asking questions about an individual's family.
- Provide an opportunity for participants to ask questions of interviewers, allowing interviewers to respond authentically, before starting the interview.
- Pilot interview and focus group discussion guides with community members before using them widely to make final adjustments with an eye towards cultural appropriateness.

³ Peters, D., and L. Giacumo. "[Ethical and Responsible Cross-Cultural Interviewing: Theory to Practice Guidance for Human Performance and Workplace Learning Professionals.](#)" 2020.

⁴ Hass, M., and A. Abdou. "[Culturally Responsive Interviewing Practices.](#)" 2019.

⁵ Au, A. "[Thinking about Cross-Cultural Differences in Qualitative Interviewing: Practices for More Responsive and Trusting Encounters.](#)" 2019.

families being served by your program. Families engaging in this approach will require both moral support and functional supports (like guidance and support on how to dress), which program staff should be prepared to provide.



Visual feedback and other nonwritten feedback. Visual feedback activities can capture the experiences and perspectives of families that may be difficult for them to articulate through words. One such activity is PhotoVoice, where families are provided cameras to document their experiences through photographic storytelling. Other such activities include journey maps, [life story boards](#), and other [drawing-based](#) approaches, where families can show their pathways and experiences through programs to identify areas for improvement through drawings. These approaches are commonly used to gather input from youth. The approaches should be driven by what communities are most comfortable with.

The results of visual feedback approaches can be more difficult for program administrators and staff to interpret and include in decision making for program continuous improvement. Program staff who are interested in these types of techniques may want to work with external facilitators who are experienced in these approaches as they use them for the first time. They also might be best used to supplement other approaches for gathering family input presented here.

If you are interested in learning more about PhotoVoice, including when it may be appropriate to use, staffing and planning, and example timelines and templates for getting started, consider reviewing this [Facilitator’s Toolkit for a PhotoVoice Project](#).

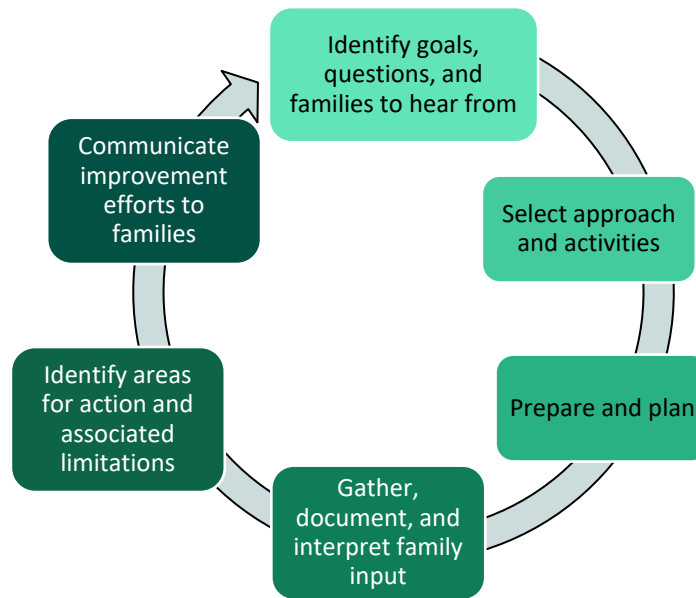
Building Trust by Using and Communicating Input from Families

No matter which approach or specific activity you select for gathering family input, it is important to “close the loop” with families and tell them how you used their feedback. Exhibit 7.2 shows when you can close the feedback loop with families after consulting with them.

How can we report back to families? No matter how you choose to report back to families on the outcomes of your engagement with them, you should plan to share next steps soon after gathering input from them. Some potential formats for reporting back to families include:

- Direct communication to families who provided input using a medium that works best for families (email, mail, phone call, meetings).
- Sharing with all families through regular program participant communications or including in other materials mailed or emailed to families.
- Announcements to the general public through additional listening sessions, on the program website or social media, or program update newsletters.

Exhibit 7.2. Family input process loop



What should we report back to families? Simply sharing that family input was considered when making a program or policy decision is not sufficient to show families that their input is valued. Programs should include the following elements in their report back to families after an engagement:

- A summary of what program staff heard from families.
- Action items developed based on family input and when program staff expect to be able to complete them.
- A summary of major areas of feedback that program staff were not able to act on and why.
- A summary of next steps for the project or continuous improvement process and any plans for future opportunities for family input.

Tip for Program Administrators

You do not need to wait to complete all plans or actions related to families’ input before approving communication to families. Families understand that not all changes are easy or straightforward. They want to know that you are listening to them and value their time and unique perspectives so interim updates on progress are helpful.

Going Deeper: Bringing Families into Continuous Program Improvement

In Section 8: Integrating Family Input Throughout Program Improvement, we provide suggestions for how to make gathering and using family input a regular activity and for opportunities to work with families to develop potential solutions to issues that come up based on their input.

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