

Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs

9: Sharing Power with Families to Drive Continuous Improvement

If you and your program team have become comfortable gathering and using family input as part of your continuous improvement process, consider opportunities to expand the role of families in driving the process. To deepen program support of the aspirations of families, TANF cash assistance and child support program staff can provide opportunities for families to take on leadership roles in the continuous improvement process.

Power sharing involves operationalizing families' feedback, ideas, and concerns into organizational goals, initiatives, and practices.

Preparing to share power with families

The idea of sharing power with families can sound intimidating or out of reach for many program staff and administrators. However, with preparation and strong program leadership, program staff can realize the benefits that come from shifting power to families in continuous improvement processes, including more robust and family experience-driven feedback.

What is power sharing? Power sharing involves operationalizing families' feedback, ideas, and concerns into organizational goals, initiatives, and practices. This is a process that requires ongoing engagement, collaboration, clear communication, the creation of feedback structures for families, and buy-in from all levels of staff. Power sharing is a tangible way to demonstrate the value of families' lived experiences by increasing their influence on the decisions programs make.

How do program staff prepare to shift power to families?

Beginning to share power with families in the continuous improvement process likely requires changes in organizational culture and procedures. These likely include changes in staff and administrator practices, relationships, and mindsets. We describe some changes to practice and relationships in Section 7: Getting Started on Gathering and Using Family Input and Section 8: Integrating Family Input Throughout Program Improvement. Program staff and administrator mindsets can be the most difficult to change. Exhibit 9.1 describes some of the most relevant mindset shifts that program staff in TANF and child

Program Administrators: Reinforce the value of collaboration with families through your actions

A mindset shift, such as a shift from compliance-driven interactions with families to a collaborative problem-solving relationship, is unlikely to happen just because an administrator tells staff to change. One way to demonstrate the value of collaboration with families is through performance measures.

Administrators can consider changing any performance measures within their control to center not only family participation, but also family experiences. Consider whether you can modify local program performance measures or staff performance measures to indicate positive outcomes for families. De-emphasizing process measures and focusing on goal-driven outcome measures can contribute to a positive organizational culture in which staff and family outcomes can improve.¹

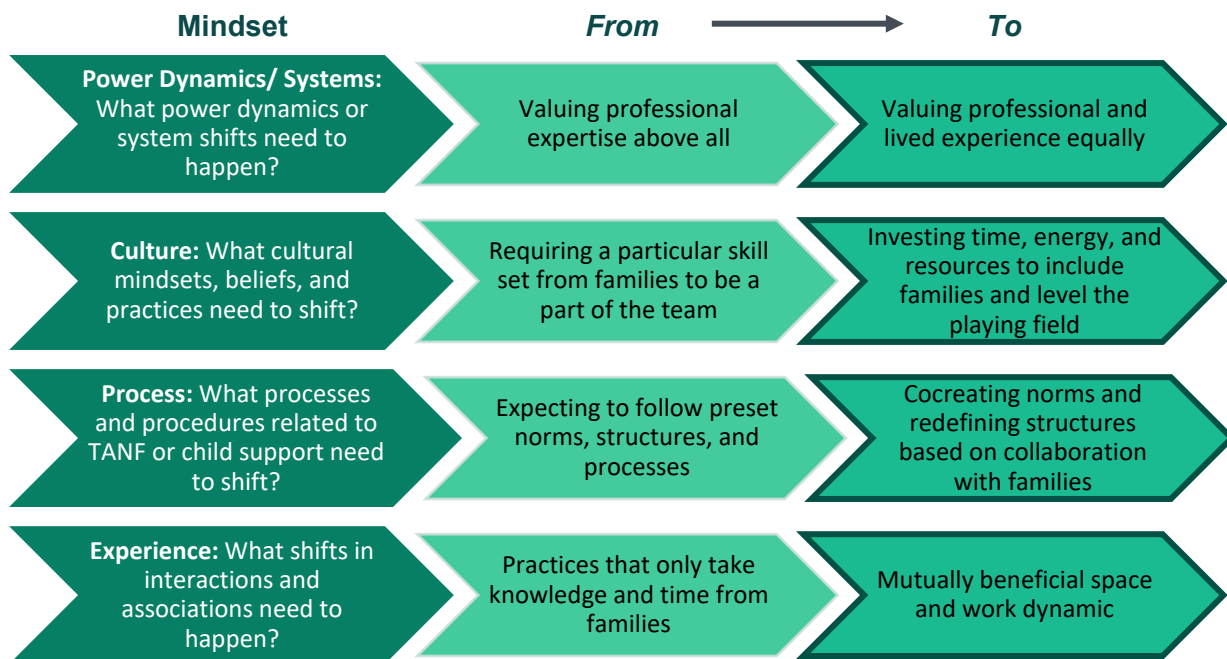
¹ Gaffney, A., A. Glosser, and C. Agoncillo. "[Organizational Culture in TANF Offices: A Review of the Literature.](#)" 2018.

support programs may need to make to start shifting decision-making power to families. A [strategy brief from Casey Family Programs](#) includes additional details on these shifts.



How can leaders advance power sharing shifts? Program leaders at all levels set the tone for their organization and the staff they supervise. Leaders should articulate a clear vision for the change they want to accomplish through program improvement, including why the change is important, and reiterate the vision frequently. Leaders should also create the psychological safety for their staff to change, especially if the change does not appear to align with staff or program performance measures. Creating or modifying processes or incentives to reinforce the shift toward sharing power with families in program improvement is essential—it shows that you are backing up your words with actions. For more on preparing and leading through change, see Section 6: Preparing for Change.

Exhibit 9.1. Examples of program staff mindset shifts for sharing power with families in continuous improvement²



Providing resources and space for families to drive continuous improvement

Some human services agencies across the country, including those that oversee TANF and child support programs, have started to shift some decision-making power to families through their development of and partnerships with family advisory councils. In programs with advisory councils, sharing power with families shows up as:

- Council members receive information about upcoming plans, decisions, or processes so they can choose to weigh in and engage with program staff.
- Council members are supported and prepared in ways members need to allow them to participate fully and authentically in both the Council activities and continuous improvement efforts. For example, council members are compensated at levels that recognize their influence and expertise.

² Adapted from Rudd, C., S. Kalra, J. Walker, and J. Hayden. [“How can organizations assess their readiness to co-design?”](#) n.d.

- Council members can drive the content and interactions with each other and guests during council meetings.
- Program and agency staff make good-faith efforts to enact the recommendations the Council proposes.

Sharing power with the Colorado Family Voice Council

Colorado Department of Human Services

The Colorado Department of Human Services' (CDHS') Family Voice Council includes people with lived experiences in at least two programs relevant to the agency's work, with the goal of representation across agency programs, geography, and personal identities. Soon after the Council's inception, CDHS administrators and leaders bought in to the principle of collaborating with families to improve their programs. **CDHS encouraged buy-in and normalized the shift in power by:**

- Having designated liaisons from each department look for opportunities to engage the Family Voice Council.
- Leveraging family engagement champions across programs. **CDHS regularly convened staff across programs to share lessons learned** from engaging the Family Voice Council and upcoming opportunities for their input.
- **Ensuring that program staff who met with the Family Voice Council were well prepared.** The Director of Family and Community Engagement, who facilitates the Council, and a Family Voice Council member meet with program staff interested in engaging the Council to set expectations and provide program staff with tips for engaging the Council effectively. This increases the likelihood of a positive and worthwhile experience for both Council and program staff.

CDHS staff value the input and honesty the Family Voice Council members provide. Although program staff are not bound to follow or act on the Council's feedback, most do because of the trust and respect they have for the input of the families who serve on the Council.

Program staff who engage the Council are asked to share whether they used the Council's feedback, and if not, why they did not. Federal policy and regulations are the most common reasons for not acting on Council's feedback.

Developing and supporting a family advisory council

Here are some steps TANF and child support agencies can take to support families and program staff in the council development process and ongoing engagement. Below each, we share examples from the field.



Cocreate the terms of interaction between council members and program staff. Program staff may be new to interacting with families as experts, rather than as "customers" being served through their program. Council members may also be new to working in a council setting. Creating simple terms for council members to interact with each other and with those they collaborate with can increase the chances that those interactions are respectful and productive.

In Section 8: Integrating Family Input Throughout Program Improvement, we share some program-specific considerations for starting advisory councils.

- CDHS and the Family Voice Council [established rules of engagement](#) that all individuals working with the Council and Council members themselves agree to follow. Examples of these rules of engagement include:

- ✓ Provide a safe and positive culture.
- ✓ Always assume positive intent.
- ✓ Pronounce your name before speaking.
- ✓ Respect the process. Practice patience.
- ✓ Review boundaries and triggers as needed. If triggered, please send a private message to the facilitator.



Clearly define the role of the advisory council within the agency or department. There are several ways in which programs can enable advisory councils to operate, either autonomously or with a well-defined position and responsibilities within the department or program. Defining the role of the advisory council can provide clarity for members and program staff as the council is created and support continuity as program staff and council members change over time.

This relationship dynamic, among other elements of advisory councils, can be codified in charters. The Michigan Office of Child Support [Community Advisory Council's Charter](#) and Colorado Department of Human Services [Family Voice Council's Charter](#) provide helpful examples of what these charters can look like for human services agencies.

- The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support completely shifts power to its Community Advisory Council in selecting the issues and topics they address. Program staff provide regular updates on upcoming opportunities to provide input to the Council, but the Council is not required or asked to address specific issues that may be of interest to program staff. Because of this power shift, the Council has been able to put forward issues and proposed solutions that program staff had not previously considered. An example of the Council's work is described in a call-out box on the following page.



Create space for families to build their social capital, transferable skills, and program knowledge to level the playing field. Family members bring a wealth of knowledge from their personal and professional experiences prior to participating on family advisory councils. They might still have gaps in skills and knowledge that would allow them to contribute more directly and more deeply on issues facing TANF and child support programs. The importance of planning for this element of gathering and using family input is discussed further in Section 8.

- CDHS intentionally creates space for Family Voice Council members to participate in educational opportunities, build relationships with each other, and build their skills to help the Department directly on projects related to their interests.



Meet the needs of families as they participate, and value their time as experts. Providing support for families when program staff ask for their input is important regardless of the context or setting. When program staff aim to develop long-term relationships like those developed through family advisory councils, it is important that families can rely on these supports so they can regularly attend meetings and that their time is valued as any other type of expert would be.

- CDHS staff provide council members with accessibility supports (such as translation and interpretation services), child care services during events, transportation, stipends, and support for other expenses associated with participating.

- The Michigan Child Support Community Advisory Council has only held virtual meetings since it began in early 2021, but compensating members for their time has been a high priority. The program initially provided participants with gift cards, but they have recently been able to compensate participants with cash just as they would an expert consultant. The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services is working with the program to pilot test providing \$42 per hour to council members, as a strategy for adequately compensating community experts with lived experiences.



Regularly check in with council members about how they feel about council processes and experiences.

Council members regularly discuss difficult and complicated program issues. The process for coming to a consensus across families with diverse experiences and values may not necessarily be clean or straightforward, and a diverse council may not ever come to a complete consensus. It is important to regularly check in with council members about their experiences with council activities, processes, interactions, and outcomes to identify areas for improvement and ensure the experience is valuable to members.

- CDHS staff survey council members and presenters after council meetings to identify areas of confusion, conflict, and success. This information is used to continuously improve how program staff engage with the Council. Annual summaries of these surveys can be found in the [Family Voice Council’s most recent report](#).



Allow family advisory councils to lead their own communication, including publishing their own strategies and reports.

All family advisory councils will require some amount of staff support, which may include assistance with tasks such as coordinating and scheduling, taking minutes, and meeting facilitation. Beyond the supports that enable family advisory council activities to run smoothly, programs and agencies that successfully share power set up their councils to largely operate autonomously. This means councils can develop their own agendas, strategy and goal documents, and proposals for program policy changes, and can report on the outcomes of their work. New council members can also be selected by a vote of the members themselves.

- The Colorado Family Voice Council’s strategic plan called the [Plan for the Future](#) communicates the Council’s goals and priorities through the upcoming two years. CDHS ensures that its engagement efforts align with the agency’s strategic goals by mapping the Family Voice Council’s strategic plan to the agency strategic plan through a [Family and Community Engagement Plan](#).

Family-Driven Solutions

Michigan’s Community Advisory Council identified the need for family advocates within the state’s child support system, due to the complicated nature of the program’s design. The Council prepared a formal proposal memorandum to establish family advocates. The proposal outlined areas where advocates could improve family outcomes and experiences.

This proposal surprised program staff as it is not aimed at improving the program processes themselves, but instead focusing on bridging and navigating them. Program staff believe that this would not have come to light through “root cause” identification approaches commonly used in continuous improvement work, because it is focused on directly improving family experiences of the system rather than trying to resolve the issues contributing to their negative experiences.



Want to learn more from Colorado’s work with the Family Voice Council?

The Colorado Department of Human Services recently released an online toolkit based on what they have learned through their work with the Family Voice Council. The toolkit, called the [Family Voice Compass](#), includes templates, tools, and example documents from their work that can provide additional context and guidance for starting and supporting a family advisory council.

Going Deeper: Continuing to incorporate empowering practices

Although a fully empowering engagement strategy, as described in Section 4, may not be possible for programs like TANF and child support, administrators and staff can continue to expand their use of empowering practices like those described in this section. In general, allowing families to take the lead in identifying issues and developing and implementing solutions to improve a program empowers families and demonstrates a program’s trust in and respect for the families it serves.

March 2023

OPRE Brief 2023-024

Jeanette Holdbrook (Mathematica), Lisa Rau (MEF), Bethany Boland (MEF), Shaun Stevenson (Mathematica), Mark Ezzo (Mathematica), and Imani Hutchinson (MEF)

Submitted to:

Lisa Zingman and Girley Wright, Federal Project Officers
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Submitted by:

Project Director: Rebekah Selekman
Mathematica
1100 First Street, NE, 12th Floor
Washington, DC 20002-4221

Suggested citation: Holdbrook, Jeanette, Lisa Rau, Bethany Boland, Shaun Stevenson, Mark Ezzo, and Imani Hutchinson (2022). *Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs: Resources for Program Staff, Leaders, and Families*, OPRE Brief # 2023-024, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This brief was funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, under contract number 47QRAA18D00BQ.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This report and other reports sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation are available at www.acf.hhs.gov/opre.

Connect with OPRE

