Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs:

Resources for Program Staff, Leaders, and Families

FINAL PRE-PILOT VERSION

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The Moving Forward: Furthering Family Input Expert Workgroup

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the members of the Moving Forward: Furthering Family Input Expert Workgroup. These experts were integral in conceptualizing and building these resources. We are humbled by their vision for and commitment to elevating the voices of families in program improvement efforts in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Tribal TANF, and child support programs. We appreciate and value each member for their ongoing feedback throughout the development and testing of these resources.

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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of these members.

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Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs

1: Orientation to Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs: Resources for Program Staff, Leaders, and Families

What are these resources?

This is a collection of guidance, tools, and resources for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and child support program staff, administrators, and the families those programs serve. The information and resources included here can help program administrators and staff better engage families for their input and involvement in efforts to improve these programs.

These resources draw on lessons learned from human services programs, including TANF, child support, youth development, child welfare, responsible fatherhood, and more.[2]

Typically, program leaders improve programs by collecting and acting on information from staff, program partners, and data systems. However, human services programs, including TANF and child support, do not consistently engage families for their input during continuous improvement processes.[1] Engaging families is essential to understand how to better serve them and improve the experiences and outcomes of families the program will serve in the future.

Who should use these resources?

We collected and created these resources for a variety of audiences in **TANF and child support programs:**[3]

- **Program staff,** including staff and managers at the state, regional, and frontline levels, who work with families daily and who may make decisions about and implement local service delivery and program operations.
- **Program administrators,** who set local policies, performance measures, and expectations for service delivery.
- **Families** whom TANF and child support programs have served, currently serve, and aim to serve. We include resources that support a deeper understanding of the programs, describe the ways in which families might be involved in improving the programs, and offer ideas for how to advocate for change.

Although most of the examples and considerations included here focus on TANF and child support, other human services program administrators and staff may also find these resources useful.

[1] Rau, L., B. Boland, and J. Holdbrook. "Gathering and Using Family Input to Improve Child Support and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Services: Approaches from the Human Services Field." 2022.

[2] These resources will be tested with TANF and child support programs and revised in 2025. See box on the following page for more information.

[3] Throughout these resources, we use the terms "TANF and child support" to include the TANF and child support programs that states, tribes, territories, and counties administer. While our intention is for programs to adapt these resources for their specific program and community contexts, we recognize that many of the resources included here do not come from programs that tribes administer. We have included examples and resources from Tribal programs when available. We hope to include more after pilot testing these resources with TANF and child support programs, including those that tribes administer.

Background and motivation for Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs: Resources for Program Staff, Leaders, and Families

Seeking and obtaining feedback from families on how programs can better operate, improve services, and serve future families can create more effective and equitable social programs. Some federally funded human service programs already seek and incorporate feedback from families, particularly in the fields of child welfare, youth homelessness prevention, teen pregnancy prevention, and home visiting programs. However, obtaining and using input from families to inform program service delivery and operational improvements appears to be much less common in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and child support programs.

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has partnered with Mathematica and MEF Associates to conduct the TANF and Child Support Moving Forward: Further Incorporating Family Input study. This study seeks to (1) understand how TANF, child support, and other human services programs gather and use family input for program improvement; (2) identify ways for TANF and child support programs to incorporate family input for program improvement; and (3) identify the successes and challenges these programs face in gathering and using family input. The study team hopes that these resources support and encourage TANF and child support programs to partner with families to improve their programs.

Click here for more information about the Moving Forward study.

Development and testing of these resources

To develop these resources, the study team convened an Expert Workgroup consisting of members with diverse identities and experiences, including TANF, Tribal TANF, and child support program staff and people currently or previously served by those programs. Together, the study team and Expert Workgroup conceptualized and developed these resources. These resources were also informed by the study team's prior knowledge development activities, including a targeted literature scan of academic and non-academic literature and consultations with TANF, Tribal TANF, child support, and human services program leaders, which are summarized in a brief (Gathering and Using Family Input to Improve Child Support and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Services: Approaches from the Human Services Field).

To ensure these resources are valuable, relevant, and actionable for TANF and child support programs, the study team will partner with eight TANF and child support programs to pilot test them between 2023 and 2024. Pilot sites will use these resources as they plan for and carry out a program improvement effort that engages families in the process. Administrators and staff from each pilot site will provide ongoing feedback about these resources to the study team during and after the 12-month pilot period. The study team will use the experiences and feedback from the pilot sites to revise these resources and expects to publish an updated, final version in 2025.

Why use these resources?

TANF cash assistance and child support programs, with their restrictive policy environments and historically compliance-focused cultures, have opportunities for growth in how they engage families during continuous quality improvement efforts. These resources are designed to encourage and make it easier for TANF and child support program staff and leaders to actively seek to hear the opinions and perspectives of families they have served, are currently serving, or could serve in the future as they improve their services, processes, operations, service delivery, program spaces, or policies.

How these resources are organized

Program leaders and staff using these resources should consider what they want to learn about engaging families in the program improvement process, then navigate to the section that best aligns with their starting point and goals.

? How can you gain a better understanding of program or continuous improvement processes?	Go to Section 2 What Do We Mean by Program Improvement?
? How can you make the case for gathering input from families to improve your program?	Go to Section 3 Why Engage Families in Your Program Improvement Efforts?
? What can family engagement look like in program improvement?	Go to Section 4 An Overview of Family Engagement in Program Improvement
? How can you restore, build, or maintain trust with the families you engage?	Go to Section 5 Building and Maintaining Trust with Families
? What can you do to get your program ready to include families in program improvement?	Go to Section 6 Preparing for Change
? Are you new to gathering family input for program improvement and not sure where to start?	Go to Section 7 Getting Started on Gathering and Using Family Input
? Do you already gather input from families but want to formalize or deepen how you engage families?	Go to Section 8 Integrating Family Input Throughout Program Improvement
? Do you want to start to share decision-making power with the families you engage in program improvement?	Go to Section 9 Sharing Power with Families to Drive Continuous Improvement
? Do you want tools or resources that can help you plan for, collect, and incorporate feedback from families in program improvement?	Go to Section 10 Family Input Toolbox

Notes to readers

- Based on your needs and interests, you can refer to some or all of the resources. Many of these resources are designed to stand alone, so you likely do not need to read everything.
- Human services programs and the communities they serve are diverse, so we encourage you to adapt these resources for your specific community and program context.
- We use the term "family" throughout these resources to include people who might be eligible for, receive services from, or be past participants of TANF or child support programs. We use this person-centered term based on the guidance from the Expert Workgroup that informed the development of these resources. We believe it acknowledges the scope of impact that TANF and child support programs have beyond the person or people with whom the programs directly interact. The term "family" acknowledges the people involved but does not define them by their role in a system or program.

Navigation Tips

Looking for program-specific information?

Look for callouts like this to find considerations or adaptations that are specific to either **TANF** or **child support**.

Looking for another perspective?

Look for callouts like this to find considerations that might be specific to **program administrators or program staff**.

Looking for real world examples?

Look for callouts like this to find **examples** from TANF, child support, or other human services programs.

Looking for helpful tools to support your efforts?

Look for this symbol throughout to quickly locate relevant tools. 

All of the tools, resources, guides, and more that are referenced in Sections 2 – 9 are also listed in the Family Input Toolbox in Section 10.

2: What Do We Mean by Program Improvement?

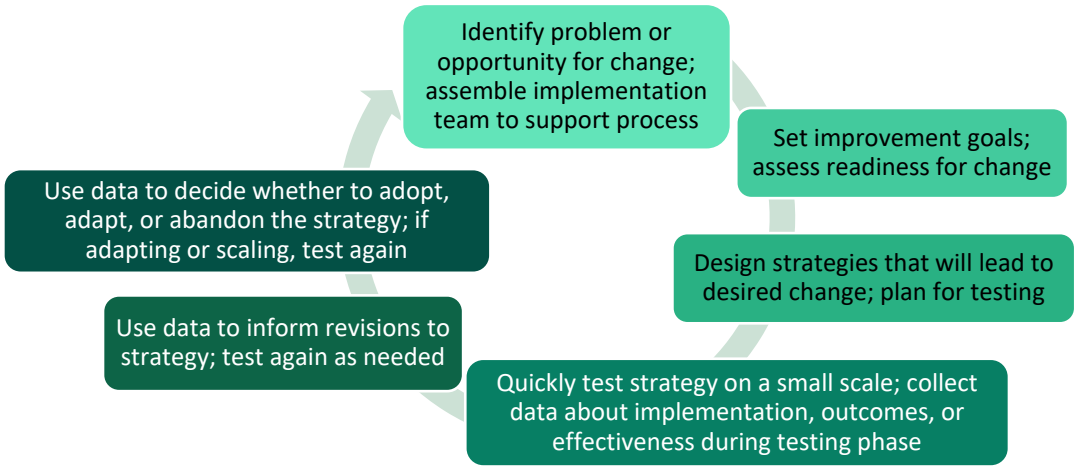
Program improvement refers to a systematic change process designed to lead to measurable improvements in program outcomes, effectiveness, efficiency, performance, and accountability.[1] Any time a program's staff or leaders want to make a change that they believe will move outcomes in a positive direction—for example, improved family or staff experience, streamlined processes, or better outcomes—they engage in a change process.

Also sometimes called *continuous quality improvement*,[2] program improvement is:

- ✓ **Systematic:** no matter the change, program leaders and staff typically follow the same process to plan for, test, and evaluate the change
- ✓ **Inclusive:** staff at all levels and people the change might impact are part of the change process
- ✓ **Cyclical:** often, changes are tested, revised, and retested until they work well or achieve the desired outcomes
- ✓ **Data-driven:** deciding what to change and testing the change provide opportunities to collect data, which program leaders and staff use to inform their next steps
- ✓ **Capacity-building:** people involved in the process can learn analytic methods and access leadership opportunities by participating in committees or workgroups that lead the change effort

Exhibit 2.1 shows what activities program improvement cycles typically include.

Exhibit 2.1. Typical elements of a program improvement cycle[3]



You can explore the following frameworks to learn more about program improvement processes: Plan, Do, Study, Act; Breakthrough Series Collaborative; and Learn, Innovate, Improve.

[1] The DaSy Center. "Program Improvement." 2022.
[2] The National Learning Consortium. "Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Strategies to Optimize your Practice." 2013.
[3] This original graphic draws on three program improvement frameworks (Plan, Do, Study, Act; Breakthrough Series Collaborative; and Learn, Innovate, Improve) to summarize common elements.

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 families[1] 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:

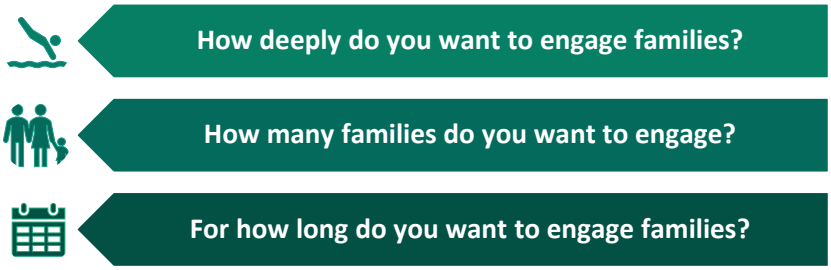
- The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) has encouraged agencies to take advantage of the flexibility provided to states in designing their TANF cash assistance programs to pursue innovation and engage families in the process.
- Tribal TANF agencies already have considerable flexibility in developing and administering their programs,[4] and have used it to infuse tribal culture and indigenous ways of knowing in program design.[5]

[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. Hillabrant, and C. Narducci. "A Descriptive Study of Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy (TANF) Programs." 2013.

Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs

4: An Overview of Family Engagement in Program Improvement

Because of the variation in TANF cash assistance and child support programs, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to engaging families in program improvement. The approach that program administrators and staff take should make sense for their program's circumstances. Considering the following questions can help determine the approach that is right for your program:



I. How deeply do you want to engage families in program improvement?

Deeper engagement means increased collaboration and communication with families over the program improvement effort. It also means sharing more decision-making power with families about how to change the program. The deeper the engagement, the more the program promises to not only listen to families' feedback, but to act on it as well.

We adapted the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation[1] to describe the variation in how deeply programs engage families. From lightest-touch to deepest engagement, the levels of the spectrum are **inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower.** These levels are intended to help program staff understand the different ways they can engage with families, but are not meant to be strict categories that neatly define all types of engagements. Exhibit 4.1 describes each level, starting with the lightest touch form of engagement and ending with the deepest engagement.

Most programs already "inform" families about program improvements. However, many programs may feel limited in their ability to shift final decision-making power to families and "empower" families. The resources and tools included here can help programs begin to take steps towards shifting power to families, so they focus on consulting with, involving, and collaborating with families. These levels of engagement are likely aspirational, but still attainable, for most TANF and child support programs looking to develop and expand their incorporation of family input into their work.

[1] We adapted this model to be more specific to TANF and child support programs, including how they are likely to engage families in continuous quality improvement processes.

Exhibit 4.1. Spectrum of family engagement in TANF and child support program improvement

Learn more about these levels in the following sections:

- Section 7: Getting Started on Gathering and Using Family Input describes how to consult with families.
- Section 8: Integrating Family Input Throughout Program Improvement describes how to involve families.
- Section 9: Sharing Power with Families to Drive Continuous Improvement describes how to collaborate with families.

Remember:

The levels of engagement we describe above are intended to help you understand the different ways you can engage with families, but are not meant to be strict categories that neatly define all types of engagements.

Whether your program engages families by informing them or by collaborating with them, we encourage you to engage families more deeply by including them in more parts of the program improvement process and by sharing more decision-making power with them.

To see how program staff might consult, involve, and collaborate with families across the phases of program improvement, see the **Engaging Families in a Program Improvement Process** tool in Section 10.

II. How many families do you want to engage in program improvement?

Another way that program staff and administrators can think about engaging families in program improvement is in terms of how small- or large-scale you want the effort to be. The scale of an engagement depends on how many family perspectives program staff and leaders would like to hear from during their program improvement effort. Program staff can aim to include input from as few as one family member or as many as all participating families, depending on the goal of the engagement. Exhibit 4.2 includes examples of small- and large-scale family engagement efforts.

Exhibit 4.2. Examples of small- and large-scale family engagements

Small-scale		Large-scale
A program conducts **two** focus groups to learn about families' experiences working with their case manager.	⟷	A program conducts **five** focus groups, which include at least two individuals from each case managers' current or previous caseload, to learn about their experiences working with their case manager.
A program invites **a small number of people** who recently completed GED classes to be part of a short-term work group (deeper level of engagement).	⟷	A program asks **everyone** who participated in any GED classes in the past six months, regardless of completion status, to complete a 10-minute survey (lighter-touch level of engagement).

The first example in Exhibit 4.2 shows how the scale can vary when the desired depth of engagement is the same. Typically, however, programs that want a large-scale approach (that is, they want to hear from a wide variety of families) select a lighter-touch level of engagement, such as consulting families through a survey. This is illustrated in the second example in Exhibit 4.2. Deeper levels of engagement, such as collaborating with or empowering families, may require more time and effort from both program staff and the families involved; therefore, the program may choose a smaller scale approach that engages fewer families in these cases.

III. For how long do you want to engage families in program improvement?

When program staff and administrators think about how deeply they want to engage families in program improvement and how many families they want to engage, you might consider the time commitment for engaging families. The time commitment of an engagement refers to how long the program needs to prepare for and engage with the same group of families to gather and use their input. Exhibit 4.3 includes examples of family engagement efforts with varying time commitments for program staff, including before and after directly engaging families.

Deeper levels of engagement might require greater commitments by staff and families because they typically involve repeated engagement over a longer period of time and more preparation. Lighter touch engagements are usually the least time intensive.

Exhibit 4.3. Examples of family engagements of varying time commitments

	Example	Time commitment for program staff
Less time  **More time**	A program administers a survey to all participants who have received employment counseling services in the past three months.	It takes one month to develop the survey, one month to collect data, and two weeks to analyze the data.
	A program establishes a temporary work group made up of families that will help identify areas for improvement in service delivery and make recommendations for changes.	The work group takes six months to establish and will conduct its work over the course of one year.
	A program establishes a permanent Parent Advisory Council that will advise on state-level policy.	The program spends 8-12 months establishing the Council, including the development of processes for engaging the Council, recruiting, and training members. The program expects to work with the Council for the foreseeable future.

Want to know more about how TANF, Tribal TANF, child support, and other human services programs have engaged families for their input in program improvement?

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

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.[1] 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:[2]

- 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.[3] 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.

[1] National Prevention Information Network. "Cultural Competence in Health and Human Services." 2021.
[2] Sankofa, J., H. Daly, and E. Falkenburger. "Community Voice and Power Sharing Guidebook." 2021.
[3] 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.[4]
- Hosting pre-engagement meetings to prepare program staff to respectfully meet with family member groups and set expectations.[5]
- 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.[6]

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.[7]

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.

[4] Chicago Beyond. "Why Am I Always Being Researched?" 2019.
[5] The Colorado Department of Human Services Family Voice Council described this practice in a March 2022 interview with the study team.
[6] North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. "North Carolina Child Welfare Family Leadership Model." 2019.
[7] 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).[8]

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.[9] 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

[8] 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.
[9] Stanford Social Innovation Review. "Tools and Lessons to Make Listening to Clients Feasible." N.d.

6: Preparing for Change

Including family input in program improvement likely represents a change for many TANF and child support agencies. Organizational change can be complex; it is difficult to know where and how to begin. We have divided change processes into the following three simple steps, describing each in more detail below:

1. Reflect on your organization's readiness for change.
2. Begin a change process that establishes family input as a norm and value in your organization.
3. Sustain the change through visionary leadership and best practices.

Reflect on your organization's readiness to include family input in program improvement

Whether including family input is new to your organization or something you already do, a good first step is forming an implementation team to help guide the change. These staff should be willing to learn about the strengths and challenges related to collecting and using family input and be committed to the success of the change.[3]

The implementation team should complete a readiness assessment to understand the extent to which the organization is ready to engage families in program improvement. For example, completing the Wandersman Center Readiness Thinking Tool can help your implementation team identify factors that could facilitate or impede the change you want to make.[4] With this tool, your team can reflect on your:

- **Motivation:** The degree to which an organization wants an innovation to happen
- **Innovation-specific capacity:** What is needed to make a particular innovation happen
- **General capacity:** The organization's overall characteristics, including culture and leadership

Program Administrators: How to Change When Change Is Hard[1,2]

In his book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, Dan Heath builds on an elephant-ride analogy to explain two sides of human nature that are often at odds with one another—a rider and an elephant.

- The rider represents our inner rational thinker, the analytical planner, the evidence-based decision maker.
- The elephant, on the other hand, represents our emotional side, which stays put, backs away, or rears up based on feelings and instincts.

"For change to succeed," Heath concluded, "there are three ingredients. We need paths shaped for clear and easy passage. We need riders who know where to go and can see the bright spots. And, perhaps above all, we need enthusiastic elephants." **In short, leading change means simultaneously focusing on engaging people's emotions, giving people clear direction and goals, and making it easy for them to stay focused on where you want them to go.**

[1] Varghese, S. "How To Change Things When Change Is Hard." 2010.
[2] Silva, E. and G. Clyburn. "How To Change Things When Change Is Hard." 2014.
[3] Wandersman Center. "Prevention Readiness Building Guide." 2019.
[4] Wandersman Center. "Readiness Thinking Tool." N.d.

Assessing your organization's readiness for change can help you identify areas to strengthen so you can successfully engage families in program improvement.[5] Culture, or the organization's norms and values, will often be an area on which the team needs to focus to sustain engaging families for their feedback.

Begin a culture change that establishes family input in program improvement as a norm and value in your organization

Organizational culture change is messy and complex! Achieving a change in organizational culture requires leaders and implementation teams to maintain an adaptive and flexible mindset. Exhibit 6.1 includes several guiding principles and change strategies that can help change organizational culture. It also illustrates, through an example of establishing a Parent Advisory Council, how you can use these strategies to establish family input in program improvement as an organizational norm and value.

Guide and sustain culture change through visionary leadership and best practices

Formal and informal leaders in the organization can guide culture change through visionary leadership. Visionary leaders enthusiastically champion the change and do the following:

- **Articulate a motivating vision for change** that resonates emotionally with staff. Ideally, the vision taps into staff's intrinsic motivation.
- **Create psychological safety** for staff during the change process. The core elements of psychological safety are individual safety, team respect, and team learning.[6] Staff should feel safe engaging in family input activities and not fear failure or retaliation from leadership. One way to build psychological safety early on is to reframe mistakes as learning opportunities.
- **Ensure there is clear alignment** between family input activities as an agency priority and staff motivation to participate. Staff should feel confident that participating in family input activities will keep them in good professional standing and not negatively impact their performance or their ability to meet program benchmarks.
- **Embed two-way communication opportunities** for staff to express areas of concern or tensions they are experiencing because of the change. This makes staff feel central to the change process and gives leadership an opportunity to communicate transparently, address areas of confusion, and alleviate concerns.
- **Socialize the change process** by communicating the change clearly and often to staff across levels in the organization and to relevant community partners and collaborators. The best mode of communication depends on the audience, but each audience should know what they are expected to do differently because of the change.

[5] Watson, A., B. Hernandez, J. Kolodny-Goetz, T. Walker, A. Lamont, P. Imm, A. Wandersman, and M. Fernandez. "Using Implementation Mapping to Build Organizational Readiness. " 2022.
[6] Geraghty, T. "Measuring Psychological Safety." 2020.

Exhibit 6.1. Changing Organizational Culture—Lessons from the Literature[7]

Guiding principles	Change strategy action steps	What does this look like in practice? Parent Advisory Council example
Develop a guiding coalition	• Build a coalition of staff to lead the change initiative based on staff members' interests and capacities (this may be the implementation team mentioned earlier, plus additional staff) • Involve frontline staff in the coalition	• Form an implementation team to establish a Parent Advisory Council that can advise on state-level policy decisions. Having an implementation team helps communicate to staff that the effort is collective and includes multiple perspectives.
Communicate a clear vision	• Articulate a new, shared vision widely and frequently • Communicate to build buy-in and make staff feel valued in transition	• With the implementation team, articulate and share a clear vision for the Parent Advisory Council. • Communicate that vision to staff; ensure messaging includes *why* the Council is important, *how* it will benefit staff and families, and gives staff an opportunity to *provide feedback.* Linking the effort to broader strategic priorities or goals will also help staff understand its value.
Closely monitor progress	• Divide the change initiative into smaller, distinct projects with clear success measures • Use benchmarks to monitor implementation and progress	• Plan the steps to stand up the Council (e.g., recruiting and training Council members). • Decide what success looks like and your progress toward achieving it. Carefully planning, monitoring, and communicating progress demonstrates the importance of the effort to staff, creates shared accountability for progress, and keeps the effort visible for staff.
Change mindsets and behaviors[8]	• Ensure staff understand what is being asked of them, and why • Model the behavior change you want to see in others • Make sure staff have the opportunity to build skills required to behave in a new way • Adapt processes and systems so they support the changes staff are asked to make	• Reflect on how you might model what you expect of others (e.g., if you message that it's important to collect and act on the Council's feedback, how will you share with staff examples of the Council's feedback leading to changes?). • Ensure staff build skills aligned to the success of the Council (e.g., have staff been trained on facilitation practices to help diffuse potential power dynamics if Council members are working directly with policymakers?). This investment in staff skills shows that this effort is part of a broader change and commitment to gathering and using family input.

[7] Gaffney, A., and R. Webster. "Promoting a Positive Organizational Culture in TANF Offices: Final Report." 2021.
[8] Basford, T., and B. Schaninger. "The four building blocks of change." 2016.

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
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.	**Helpful when:** Families may have nuanced and complex feedback that requires more staff time or attention to hear.	**Helpful when:** Families may be able to build on each other's experiences to provide feedback and staff capacity for intividual interviews are limited.	**Helpful when:** Families may have information on issues or concerns that program staff are not yet aware of.	**Helpful when:** Families would like to communicate their feedback directly to leaders or leaders want to hear from families directly.	**Helpful when:** Families you want to hear from prefer to communicate in a nontraditional format.
Limitations: Families generally not able to provide details on their experiences or feedback that is not requested in survey questions.	**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.	**Limitations:** Families may not be comfortable sharing their personal stories and perspectives in group settings.	**Limitations:** Program staff will not be able to ask in-depth questions about issues raised, so additional approaches may be necessary.	**Limitations:** Families and their stories may be tokenized or may not represent the experiences of other families.	**Limitations:** Staff may need training and additional time to familiarize themselves with visual or nonwritten feedback.

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.

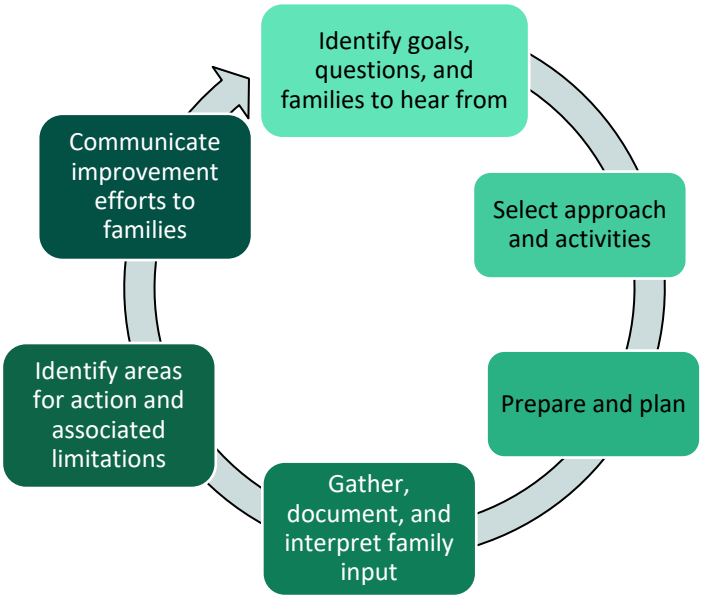
Building Trust by Using and Communicating Input from Families

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.

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 ways[2]

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.

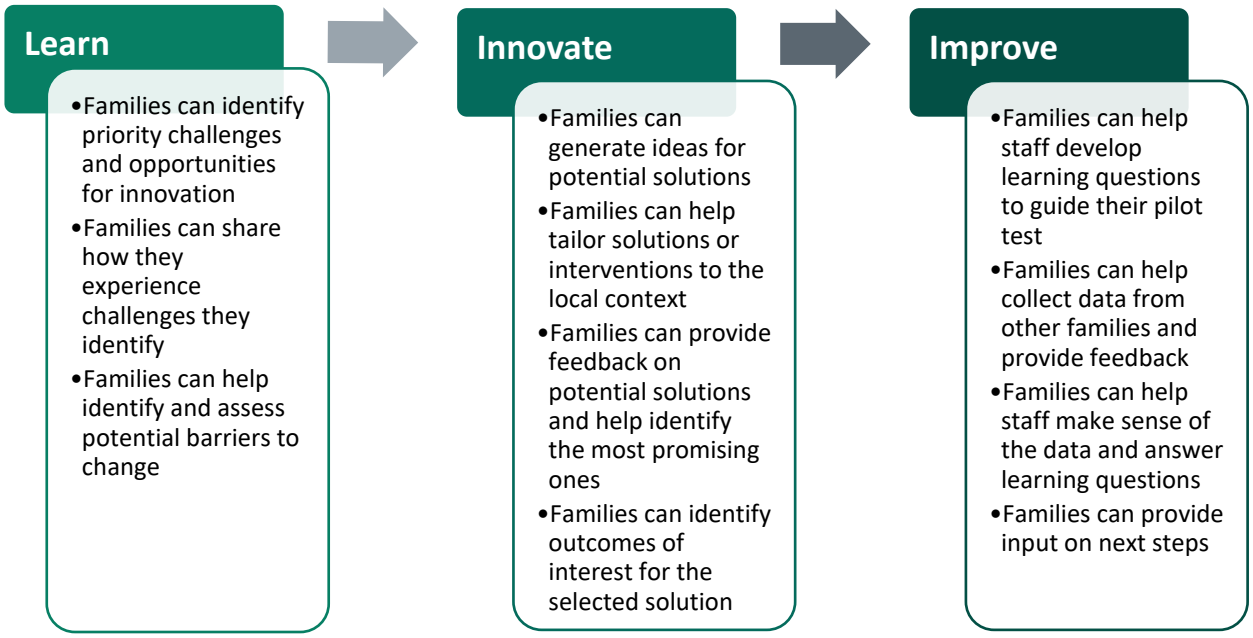
Involving families in program improvement

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 cycle[3]



- **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 Program[5]

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	• 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	• 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 program[8]
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.

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.

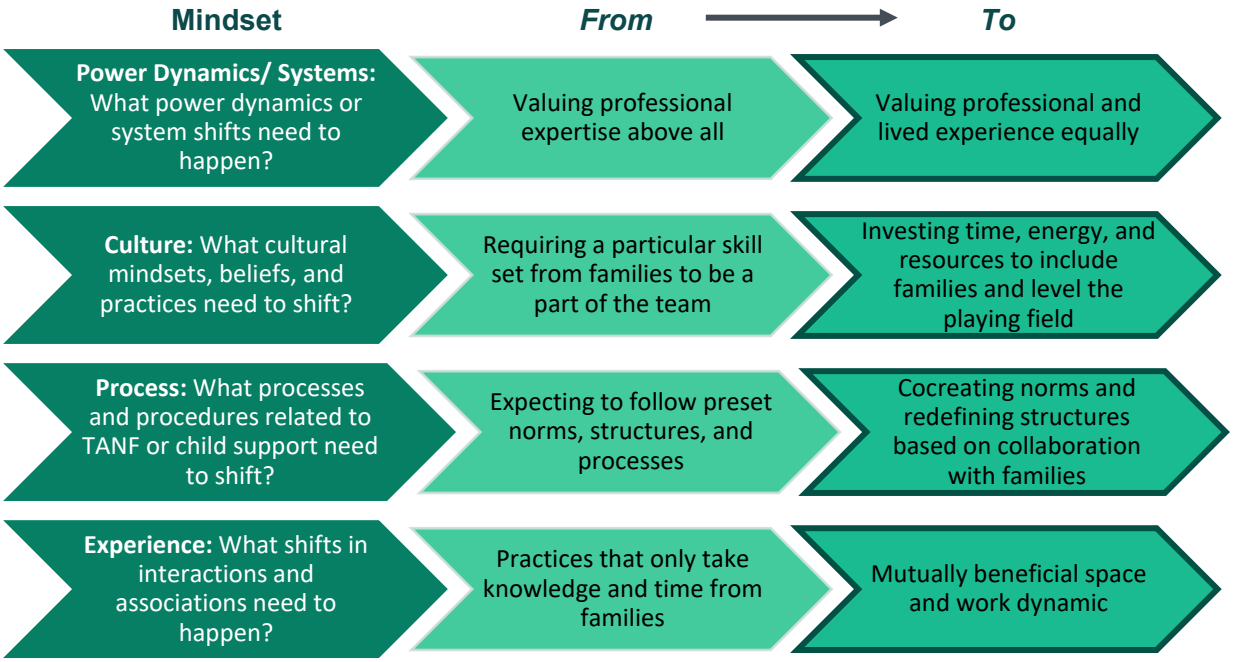
Administrators can consider changing any performance measures within their control to center not only family participation, but also family experiences. Consider whether you can modify local program performance measures or staff performance measures to indicate positive outcomes for families. De-emphasizing 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 improvement[2]



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.

Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs

10: Family Input Toolbox

This toolbox includes all of the tools, resources, guides, and more that are referenced throughout the previous sections. It also includes additional resources that many TANF cash assistance and child support program staff and administrators might find useful as you plan to engage families in program improvement.

The toolbox is organized into three sections:

- Program improvement and change
- Engaging families respectfully
- Collecting families' feedback

Each section provides the resource name, source, a brief description, list of topics the resource addresses, and in what section we reference the resource, if relevant.

How were these resources identified?

The TANF and Child Support Moving Forward: Further Incorporating Family Input study team identified the resources included here through the following activities:

- A scan of academic and non-academic literature focused on family engagement and program improvement in TANF, child support, and human services programs. This included reviews of federal, state, and local human services agency websites and websites of TANF, child support, and human services professional associations.
- Consultations with federal Administration for Children and Families staff at the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Office of Family Assistance, and the Office of Child Support Enforcement.
- Recommendations from the study's Expert Workgroup.
- Interviews with four human services programs about how they have used family input to inform improvements to their programs. These programs and their family input initiatives include the Colorado Department of Human Services, Family Voice Council; the Baltimore City Health Department, Mayor's Office of Employment Development, Baltimore Health Corps; the Clark County, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program, Life in Transition Group; and the Quinault Indian Nation Tribal TANF Program.

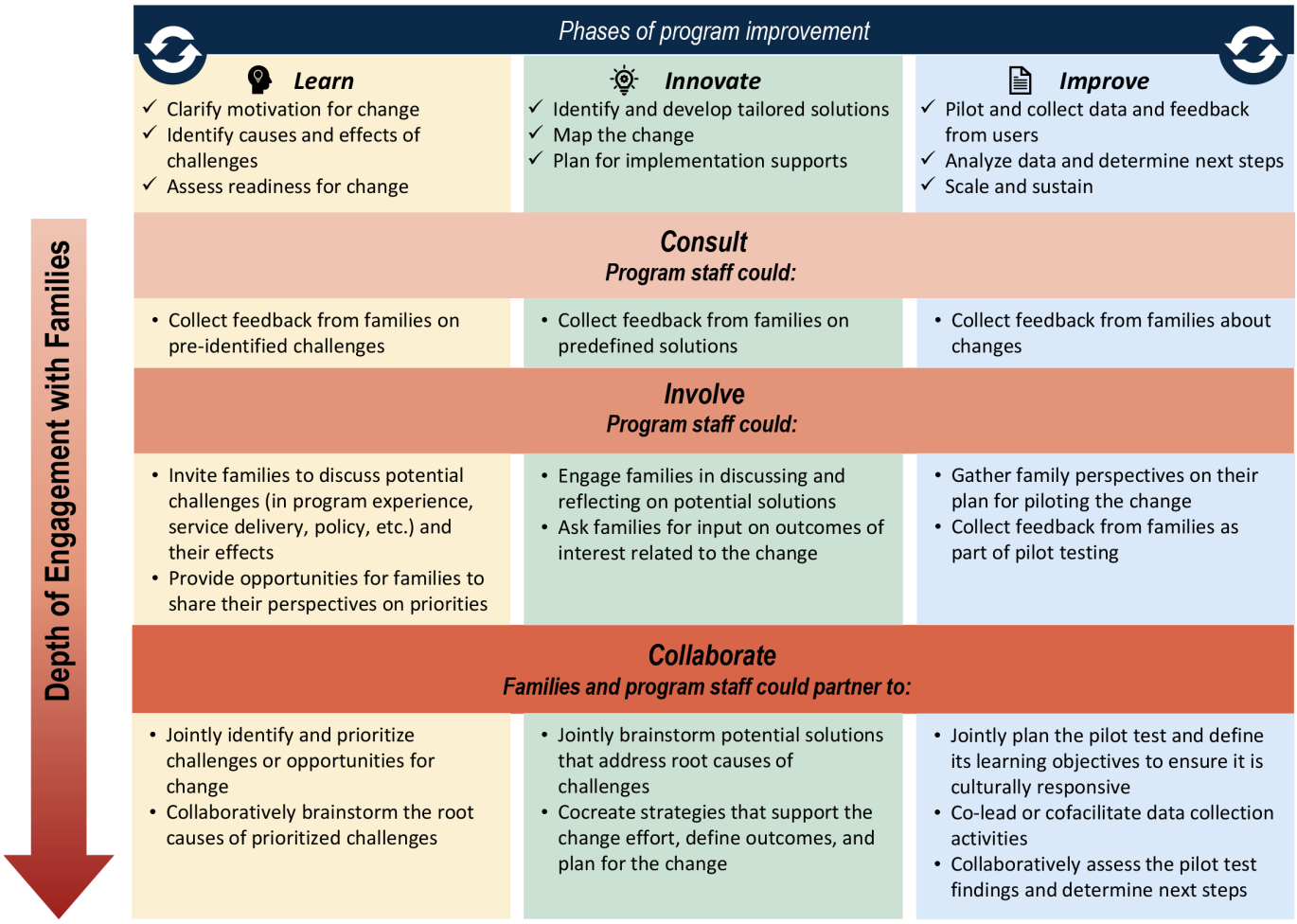
Family Input Toolbox:
Program Improvement and Change

Resource name and source	Resource description	Resource topics	Where referenced
Community Tool Box Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas	The Community Tool Box is a compendium of resources to support community-driven and community-engaged change initiatives.	• Planning for change • Engaging families in program improvement • Program improvement & continuous quality improvement • Pilot testing • Cultural competence	Not referenced
Plan, Do, Study, Act Toolkit Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality	This toolkit explains a method to implement change through a continuous quality improvement process. Included in the toolkit are directions and examples to guide program staff and administrators through each step.	• Program improvement & continuous quality improvement • Pilot testing	Section 2
The Breakthrough Series Institute for Healthcare Improvement	The Breakthrough Series is a model for collaborative learning to achieve improvement. This resource provides guidance to understanding and evaluating issues in a way that results in practical, innovative solutions that can be implemented in the program.	• Program improvement & continuous quality improvement • Pilot testing	Section 2
Continuous Quality Improvement Tip Sheet U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Family and Youth Services Bureau	This tip sheet outlines the steps in a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process and provides tips for getting started with and implementing CQI.	• Program improvement & continuous quality improvement	Not referenced
Process Mapping Tribal Evaluation Institute	This guide explains how to use a process map to understand how existing processes work or to identify how a new process should work.	• Program improvement & continuous quality improvement	Not referenced

Resource name and source	Resource description	Resource topics	Where referenced
Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI2): Enhancing Programs and Improving Lives The Learn Phase: Creating Sustainable Change in Human Services Programs The Innovate Phase: Co-Creating Evidence-Informed Solutions to Improve Human Services Programs Using a "Road Test" to Improve Human Services Programs (Practice Brief) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation	These resources provide an in-depth description of an evidence-informed approach to collaborative program improvement, specifically geared toward human services programs. In practice, these resources can help program administrators improve analytic methods to continuous quality improvement within the program infrastructure.	• Program improvement & continuous quality improvement • Pilot testing	Section 2
Wandersman Center Readiness Thinking Tool The Wandersman Center	This is a toolkit to support programs in identifying aspects of implementation that help and hinder success. This is helpful for understanding the accuracy and utility of the program improvement efforts as they are being implemented.	• Planning for change	Section 6
How Can Organizations Assess Their Readiness to Co-Design? Casey Family Programs	This brief describes co-designing, an approach that amplifies the voices and experiences of the people closest to the needs addressed through an engagement or initiative. It includes considerations for preparing to co-design.	• Planning for change • Engaging families in program improvement • Program improvement & continuous quality improvement	Section 9
Racial Equity Impact Assessment Race Forward, the Center for Racial Justice Innovation	This guide introduces racial equity impact assessments and key questions to consider to anticipate, assess, and prevent potential adverse consequences of proposed actions on different racial groups.	• Planning for change	Not referenced
Equity Impact Assessment Introduction Seattle Children's	This guide explains Equity Impact Assessment, a tool to systematically examine how groups that have been, and continue to be, disenfranchised and discriminated against will likely be affected by a proposed action or decision. It includes an Equity Impact Assessment Checklist and Tool.	• Planning for change	Not referenced

Engaging Families in a Program Improvement Process

Examples by depth and phase



The program improvement framework used in this example is Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI^2). See "Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI2): Enhancing Programs and Improving Lives" for more on LI^2.

Identifying the Right Family Engagement Approach for Your Program's Goals

Program Goals for Engaging with Families

Family Input on a Specific Process or Service

Family Input on Broader Community Needs or Issues

Family Input on Program Decision Making

	Periodic, brief service survey	One-time focus group or interview	In-depth survey	Listening sessions or family forums	Visual (nonwritten) feedback	Storytelling or testimony	Ongoing committees or work groups	Established advisory board
Staff time commitment	Low intensity	Moderate intensity	Moderate to high intensity	High intensity	High intensity	Moderate intensity	High intensity and moderate term	High intensity and long term
Scale	Survey all or a random sample of families receiving a service	From one to several families	Survey a large sample or specific subset of families	Open-invitation gatherings or focus on specific subset of families	Could offer to all participating families	Very few individuals or families	Meeting with the same or different small groups of families over time	Small, representative group of individuals
Purpose	Ask a few closed-ended questions to understand family satisfaction and experience soon after participating in or receiving a service	Ask direct questions of families to understand experience or impact	Ask mainly closed-ended questions to understand family satisfaction, experience, or reactions to ideas or proposed changes	Develop understanding of impacts and scope of problem(s) affecting the broader community of families	Through pictures or other visual media, capture families' experiences and perspectives that may be difficult to articulate through words	Allow leaders to hear the perspectives and experiences of families directly	Collaboratively identify challenges and develop and test solutions on a specific topic or service with direct input from families	Create and long-term, family-driven setting to collaboratively identify areas for improvement and solutions

Depth of Engagement with Families

This is an original graphic, inspired by the "Spectrum of Family & Community Engagement of Educational Equity" from Facilitating Power and Selecting Methods for Community Engagement from The Policy Project, among others.

Family Input Toolbox:
Engaging Families Respectfully

Resource name and source	Resource description	Resource topics	Where referenced
The Office of Child Support Enforcement's Starter Kit on Engaging People with Lived Experience in Child Support Programs U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support Enforcement	This toolkit is designed to support practitioners in engaging people with lived experience in child support programs. The toolkit outlines proper recruitment, compensation, and engagement standards for program administrators and staff seeking engagement from families in states and tribes.	• Engaging families in program improvement • Building trust with families • Equity	Section 5, Section 7
Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Through Coaching and Navigation: Insights from Convening Panelists Mathematica	This brief summarizes a panel discussion with TANF administrators and practitioners about how they advance Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion through culturally responsive coaching.	• Cultural competence • Building trust with families • Equity	Section 5
Working Effectively with Families from Diverse Cultures Pacer Center, Champions for Children with Disabilities	This tip sheet, designed for practitioners, includes best practices for working with families from diverse cultures and backgrounds.	• Cultural competence	Section 5
Beyond Inclusion: Equity for Public Engagement Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue	This resource outlines principles for equitable family engagement and specific steps for integrating these principles into practitioners' work.	• Cultural competence • Building trust with families • Equity	Section 7
The Tribal Best Practices for Family Engagement Toolkit National Indian Child Welfare Association	This toolkit includes a basic family engagement framework, concepts, and ideas for engaging families at all levels within Systems of Care. It discusses addressing historical and intergenerational trauma; culturally-based trainings and curriculum for program staff; engagement strategies; and suggestions for how families can make an impact at the policy, management, and service delivery levels within Systems of Care.	• Cultural competence • Building trust with families • Equity	Section 5
Person Centered Language Practice Tool University of Minnesota, Center for Practice Transformation	This resource provides a guide for the use of language that centers families and recognizes their dignity and strengths. The use of appropriate language for outreach and communication is a key step as you plan to gather input from families.	• Building trust with families • Cultural competence	Section 7

Resource name and source	Resource description	Resource topics	Where referenced
Methods and Emerging Strategies to Engage People with Lived Experience U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation	This brief shares the lessons learned from initiatives that engaged individuals with lived experience in an effort to inform research, policy, and practice.	• Engaging families in program improvement • Building trust with families • Equity	Section 7
Improving Cultural Competence: Quick Guide for Clinicians Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration	This guide defines cultural competence, describes how to develop cultural awareness, provides core competencies for staff, and provides strategies for organizations to develop and implement culturally responsive practices. The guide is designed for behavioral health clinicians.	• Building trust with families • Cultural competence	Section 5
National Parent Leadership Institute National Parent Leadership Institute	The National Parent Leadership Institute is a parent-centered, anti-racist organization that partners with parents and communities to equip families with the civic skills, knowledge, and opportunities to be leading advocates for children at home, at school, and in the community.	• Building trust with families • Building families' capacity	Section 8
Meaningful Parent Leadership: Building Effective Parent/Practitioner Collaboration Friends National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention	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.	• Engaging families in program improvement • Cultural competence • Building families' capacity	Section 8
Gathering and Using Family Input to Improve Child Support and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Services: Approaches from the Human Services Field U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation	This brief describes how human services programs, including TANF and child support, engage families in program improvement. It also summarizes how programs have built trust with families in support of and through their program improvement efforts. The brief summarizes a literature scan of academic and nonacademic literature and interviews with several state, county, and Tribal human services programs.	• Engaging families in program improvement • Building trust with families	Section 4, Section 5
Principles of Community Engagement Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium Community Engagement Key Function Committee Task Force	This resource is a comprehensive guide for planning and managing engagement efforts, including principles for engaging culturally and experientially diverse communities, and examples of researchers overcoming obstacles to working with different communities.	• Engaging families in program improvement • Building trust with families • Cultural competence	Not referenced

Child Support Program: What Families Engaging in Program Improvement Might Need to Know

Child support basics

- The national child support program is overseen by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- In recent years, child support has served about 20 percent of children in the United States,[1] and 91 percent of people who paid child support were fathers.[2]

Goals of child support[3]

Encourage responsible parenting, family self-sufficiency, and child well-being.	Recognize the essential role of both parents in supporting their children.

The federal government's role

- OCSE develops policy and oversees the child support operations of states, tribes, territories, and the District of Columbia. OCSE does not provide services directly to families.
- OCSE pays a majority of state program operating costs, creates policy guidance, and conducts audits of state programs, among other roles.[5]
- OCSE plays a similar role in support Tribal child support programs, including sharing best practices, providing training, convening program leaders, and reviewing and providing guidance on tribal plans and policies.[6]
- States receive extra funding from the federal government if they meet performance measures related to establishing paternity, the number of cases that have child support orders, collections on current and past due child support that parents owe, and how cost-effective their programs are.[7]

Recently, OCSE has encouraged states to adopt more family-centered child support practices and policies.[4]

For example, in 2022 OCSE released a toolkit to help child support professionals engage people with lived experience in the child support program.

The role of states and tribes in child support[8]

- Child support is administered at the state, county, territory, or tribal level. Each state and Tribal child support agency operates under a plan that is approved by OCSE. State legislatures often set and approve changes to program policies.
- Child support agencies do not represent one parent or party; they aim to meet needs of the child.
- States set their own guidelines for how much child support should be paid to the custodial parent based on the financial situation of both parents and the time they each spend with the child(ren).
- Agencies are allowed to—and in some cases, required to—charge fees to parents who receive services. Parents who receive TANF benefits do not pay fees.

[1] Congressional Research Service. "The Child Support Enforcement Program." 2021.
[2] Grall, T. "Support Providers: 2013." 2018.
[3] Office of Child Support Enforcement. "OCSE Fact Sheet." N.d.
[4] Ascend | The Aspen Institute. "Centering Child in Child Support Policy." 2020.
[5] Office of Child Support Enforcement. "Child Support Handbook." N.d.
[6] Office of Child Support Enforcement, "Tribal Child Support Programs." 2021.
[7] National Conference of State Legislatures. "Child Support Tutorial." 2021.
[8] National Conference of State Legislatures. "Child Support Tutorial." 2021.

- Agencies collect and disburse support payments. Payments are commonly collected through wage withholding.
- All local agencies must offer the following services:
  - Locating parents with whom the child does not live
  - Establishing paternity
  - Establishing and modifying child support orders
  - Collecting support payments and enforcing child support orders
  - Establishing and modifying medical child support orders
- Agencies can help families that are at risk of experiencing domestic violence safely obtain child support. These families may receive a good cause exemption to cooperation requirements (see box). Check out these resources for staff and families.

Variation in child support programs

- **Programs can be administered by states or counties.** In county-administered programs, requirements and procedures can be different in each county.[11]
- Some programs use the court system for establishing paternity, establishing and modifying orders, and enforcing orders (these are called **judicial systems**); others are able to do all or many of these activities in state or county child support offices (called **administrative systems**).[12]
- Thirty-two states operate **employment programs** for parents who pay child support, including for parents who are having a hard time paying.[13] Sometimes participation is required. Services and availability vary by state or county.
- Establishing **parenting time** is not a standardized part of the child support process, but many programs are moving toward incorporating parenting time in child support orders and most states include credit for parenting time when determining child support order amounts.[14]
- Many child support agencies partner with **fatherhood programs** that provide education and services related to responsible fatherhood and healthy relationships.[15]

Use these resources to learn more about child support in your state:

- Search for your area's program using the Intergovernmental Reference Guide and read detailed information about the program
- OCSE has contact information for state and tribal child support programs
- Check your area's child support agency website to learn more

TANF and Medicaid Cooperation Requirements[9,10]

- **Parents who receive TANF are required to cooperate with child support.** For example, a parent may be asked to provide information about the other parent to help establish a child support order. If they do not, parents risk losing TANF benefits, although there are some exceptions.
- Under federal law, TANF recipients are required to assign their rights to their child support payments to the state. Therefore, **in order to receive TANF, a parent who receives child support payments gives up their right to collect those payments**. Some states keep the money from families' child support payments to repay the state for the TANF benefits it pays to those same families. However, other states "pass through" part of child support payments to the family who receives TANF. Search here for your program's pass-through policies; review Program Category 8: "Distribution."
- Parents who receive Medicaid and child support are required to cooperate with the state child support agency. These parents must assign their rights to medical child support to the state.
- Other public assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, may also have cooperation requirements. See this brief for more information.

[9] National Conference of State Legislatures. "Child Support Tutorial." 2021.
[10] Office of Child Support Enforcement. "Child Support Handbook." N.d.
[11] National Conference of State Legislatures. "Child Support Tutorial." 2021.
[12] National Conference of State Legislatures. "Child Support Process: Administrative vs. Judicial." 2017.
[13] Office of Child Support Enforcement. "Child Support-Led Employment Programs by State." 2022
[14] Selekman, R., and L. Antelo. "Coordinating Parenting Time and Child Support: Experiences and Lessons Learned From Three States." 2020.
[15] Office of Child Support Enforcement. "Fatherhood." 2021.

TANF Cash Assistance Program: What Families Engaging in Program Improvement Might Need to Know

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) basics

TANF is a block grant administered by the Office of Family Assistance, in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. States, tribes, and territories use the funding to support many programs and services, including TANF cash assistance, which are designed to help families achieve self-sufficiency and meet at least one of the following statutory purposes of the program.

Goals of TANF block grant funding[1]

Assist needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives	End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage	Prevent and reduce the incidence of out of wedlock pregnancies	Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families

The federal government's role

- It provides TANF block grant funding to states, tribes, and territories but does not specify what proportion of the funding must be used for TANF cash assistance.
- It monitors compliance with the core statutory and regulatory rules around TANF cash assistance.
- Some of the federal government's core requirements for cash assistance funded by federal TANF[2] block grant funds[3] are as follows:

Lifetime benefit limits: States and territories cannot provide cash assistance from federal TANF funds for longer than 60 months to a family that includes an adult receiving federally funded assistance. There can be exceptions based on hardship or if states or tribes use their own money to provide assistance.

Immigrant eligibility: States, tribes, and territories cannot use federal TANF funding to assist most people with "qualified" immigration status until they have been in the United States for at least five years. Individuals who do not have a documented immigration status cannot receive TANF, although family members who are citizens (for example, children born in the U.S.) may be eligible.

Federal work rates: A certain percentage of the families with a work-eligible individual must be engaged in work activities (called a "work participation rate"). The federal government can penalize states, tribes, and territories that do not meet their target rate.

The role of states, tribes, and territories

- States, tribes, and territories have a lot of control over how they spend federal TANF funding and what their TANF cash assistance programs look like. State legislatures often set and approve changes to program policies.
- States and territories must spend some of their own money on programs for families experiencing economic hardships, which may include their TANF cash assistance program.

[1] Office of Family Assistance. "About TANF." 2022. Note: these goals were established in 1996, at the same time as the TANF program itself.
[2] Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. "Policy Basics: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families." 2022
[3] States and tribes may provide services beyond these requirements and limitations if they use other sources of funding.

- States, tribes, and territories have used their federal TANF block grant and state funds for a variety of services and supports, including:
  - ✓ Cash assistance
  - ✓ Education and job training
  - ✓ Child care
  - ✓ Transportation
  - ✓ Aid to children at risk of abuse and neglect
  - ✓ A variety of other services to help families experiencing economic hardships

What do states, tribes, and territories get to decide for their TANF cash assistance programs?

- **What to call their TANF cash assistance programs.** For example, North Carolina's program is "Work First," Louisiana's is "Family Independence Temporary Assistance Program," and Utah's is "TANF."
- **How to determine who is eligible to receive benefits.** States, tribes, and territories decide on the income level that qualifies a family and how assets count during eligibility.[6]
- **Monthly cash benefit amounts.** As of July 2021, the maximum monthly benefit for a single-parent family of three with no earnings was lowest in Arkansas ($204) and highest in New Hampshire ($1,098). The median monthly benefit across all states was $498.[7]
- **Lifetime limits on receiving TANF benefits** (if shorter than the federal limit of 60 months) and periodic time limits.[8]
- **Specific work-related activities that applicants and recipients are required to complete.** States must require adult recipients to engage in work activities, typically for 20–30 hours each week. There are 12 activities that can count toward federal work rates.[9]
- **The sanctions they impose** (reductions in or loss of benefits) if someone does not meet the requirements without good cause.
- **Who must participate in work activities.** Some programs exempt people who are over 60, pregnant or recovering from childbirth, caring for a disabled family member, or diagnosed with a medical condition that limits their ability to work.
- **How much authority counties have in administering TANF benefits.** In 10 states, TANF cash assistance is county administered, meaning counties have flexibility in how they serve families.

More about TANF cash assistance

- TANF's primary accountability measure, the work participation rate, does not reflect families' employment outcomes after leaving the program—it only looks at what activities families do while receiving benefits.
- In 2020, for every 100 families with children who were experiencing poverty nationwide, only 21 received TANF cash assistance.[4]
- Nearly half of TANF cases are "child-only," which can happen when children who receive benefits live with a non-parent relative or their parent is ineligible to receive benefits.[5]

Use these resources to learn more about TANF:

- For more about your local program, see the Office of Family Assistance's list of state and Tribal programs
- Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation Reflecting on 25 Years of TANF Research
- Center for Law and Social Policy TANF 101: Policy Briefs on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
- Center on Budget and Policy Priorities Policy Basics: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

[4] Azevedo-McCaffrey, D., and A. Safawi. "To Promote Equity, States Should Invest More TANF Dollars in Basic Assistance." 2022.
[5] Golden, O., and A. Hawkins. "TANF Child-Only Cases." 2012.
[6] Knowles, S., I. Dehry, K. Shantz, and S. Minton. "Graphical Overview of State TANF Policies as of July 2020." 2022.
[7] Safawi, A., and C. Reyes. "States Must Continue Recent Momentum to Further Improve TANF Benefit Levels." 2021.
[8] Knowles, S., I. Dehry, K. Shantz, and S. Minton. "Graphical Overview of State TANF Policies as of July 2020." 2022.
[9] National Association of Counties. "Counties and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program." 2018.

Family Input Toolbox:
Collecting Families' Feedback

Resource name and source	Resource description	Resource topics	Where referenced
IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation International Association for Public Participation	The spectrum was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process.	• Engaging families in program improvement	Section 4
Gathering and Using Family Input to Improve Child Support and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Services: Approaches from the Human Services Field U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation	This brief describes how human services programs, including TANF and child support, engage families in program improvement. It also summarizes how programs have built trust with families in support of and through their program improvement efforts. The brief summarizes a literature scan of academic and nonacademic literature and interviews with several state, county, and Tribal human services programs.	• Engaging families in program improvement • Building trust with families	Section 4, Section 5
Data Collection for Program Evaluation Northwest Center for Public Health Practice	This overview summarizes a variety of data collection activities, including when to use them, their advantages and disadvantages, tips, and examples.	• Surveys • Interviews • Focus groups • Document review • Observation	Not referenced
Online Survey Data Collection Brief U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Population Affairs	This brief shares considerations and best practices for designing surveys and collecting survey data.	• Surveys	Section 7
Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Questionnaires brief U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	This brief includes an overview of surveys, when to use surveys, how to plan and develop them, and the advantages and disadvantages of administering surveys.	• Surveys	Section 7

Resource name and source	Resource description	Resource topics	Where referenced
Checklist to Evaluate the Quality of Questions U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	This tip sheet identifies key questions to consider to evaluate the quality of the survey questions.	• Surveys • Document review	Section 7
OPA Youth Listening Session Toolkit U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Population Affairs	This tip sheet describes listening sessions, including how to plan and conduct them and making program improvements based on the information heard during the listening sessions.	• Listening sessions • Engaging families in program improvement • Building trust with families	Section 7
OPA Evaluation Interviewing Tip Sheet U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Population Affairs	This tip sheet describes interviews, when to conduct them, how to prepare for and conduct an interview, and frequently asked questions about interviews.	• Interviews	Section 7
Empathy Interviews Learning Forward	This guide describes how to prepare for and conduct empathy interviews, one-on-one conversations that use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences that help uncover unacknowledged needs.	• Interviews	Not referenced
OPA Evaluation Focus Group Tip Sheet U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Population Affairs	This tip sheet describes focus groups, when to conduct them, how to prepare for and conduct a focus group, and frequently asked questions about focus groups.	• Focus groups	Section 7
A Graphic and Tactile Data Elicitation Tool for Qualitative Research: The Life Story Board Forum: Qualitative Social Research	This tool is designed to help create a visual representation of a person's narrative or story and their related context.	• Life story boards	Section 9
DrawingOut—An innovative drawing workshop method to support the generation and dissemination of research findings PLOS ONE	This article describes a drawing workshop approach to gathering information about individuals' sensitive health experiences through artwork containing both visuals and text.	• Drawing workshops	Section 9
A Guide to Forming Advisory Boards for Family-Serving Organizations The National Child Traumatic Stress Network	This guide provides a list of things to consider as programs think about developing advisory boards. It describes decisions programs will need to make along the way and trade-offs for those decisions.	• Advisory boards	Section 8

Resource name and source	Resource description	Resource topics	Where referenced
Child Welfare Family Leadership Model North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services	This a presentation on North Carolina's Child Welfare Family Leadership Model, including core elements of the model, elements contributing to genuine collaboration in the model, and how to identify readiness for the model and implementation considerations.	• Advisory boards • Building families' capacity • Engaging families in program improvement	Section 8, Section 9
Community Advisory Council Community Advisory Council's Charter Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support, Community Advisory Council	This website describes Michigan's Child Support Community Advisory Council and the Council Charter describing the council's purpose, operations, membership, budget, and authority.	• Advisory boards • Building families' capacity • Building trust with families • Engaging families in program improvement	Section 9
Family Voice Compass Family Voice Council's Charter Family Voice Council Report Plan for the Future Colorado Department of Human Services, Family Voice Council	This website contains a wealth of resources on how to get started in developing a family advisory council, ways for program staff to shift power to families while working with an advisory council, and examples of how to use and share results. It includes many example documents and templates for tasks related to creating and supporting an advisory council.	• Advisory boards • Building families' capacity • Building trust with families • Engaging families in program improvement	Section 9
Family and Community Engagement Plan Colorado Department of Human Services	This report describes the Colorado Department of Human Services agency-wide engagement plans, including alignment of specific strategies and activities to the Family Voice Council's strategic plan, responsible individuals and groups, and specific performance measures for success.	• Advisory boards • Building trust with families • Engaging families in program improvement	Section 9
Community Advisory Board Toolkit Tennessee Department of Children's Services	This toolkit includes details about how Community Advisory Boards work with Tennessee Department of Children's Services staff, including goals, recommendations, sample documents, membership guidelines, proposed meeting structures, and bylaws.	• Advisory boards • Engaging families in program improvement	Not referenced
Tools and Resources for Project-Based Community Advisory Boards Urban Institute	This toolkit provides resources for planning, forming, and operating a community advisory board. It includes considerations, a readiness checklist, compensation guidance, and other tools.	• Advisory boards • Engaging families in program improvement • Building trust with families	Not referenced

Survey Tips for TANF and Child Support Programs[1,2,3]

Surveys are structured questionnaires that can help you gather feedback from families to improve your program. Surveys focus on a topic or set of topics and can range in the number of questions asked, the types of questions (closed-ended or open-ended), and the ways the survey is administered (web, paper, or over the phone).

Considerations for when to use surveys

Use surveys when . . .	Do not use surveys when . . .
✓ You want to gather information from many people in a short period of time with limited resources	× You want to capture detailed information about lived experiences, perspectives, and/or lessons learned
✓ You want to be able to generalize (at least somewhat) about the thoughts, opinions, or perspectives of a large group of people	× You want to ask personal or sensitive questions
✓ You want the option for responses to be anonymous	

Preparing for a survey

- Identify what you want to learn about improving your program from the survey and what types of families can provide that information.
  - Consider families with diverse perspectives and experiences with the program.
- Determine whether surveys will be anonymous.
- Plan how you will invite families to participate.
  - For example, will you send an email blast, will case managers tell families about it, or something else?
- Identify a mode (web, paper, or phone) that will make it easy for families to participate.
  - Online surveys can be very easy for program staff to create, manage, and analyze. However, program staff should consider how easily families can access a computer or the Internet.
  - See this Online Survey Data Collection Brief for more about creating online surveys, including choosing a data collection platform.
- Determine when and how often you want families to take the survey.
- Identify how you will compensate families for their time, including for anonymous surveys.

Consider whether your survey can be anonymous. Families may feel more comfortable providing honest responses on an anonymous survey.

[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Questionnaires." 2018.
[2] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Checklist to Evaluate the Quality of Questions." 2018.
[3] Office of Population Affairs. "Online Survey Data Collection Brief." 2021.

Considerations for web-based versus paper surveys

Web-based surveys	Paper surveys
• **Select a platform** to create and deploy the survey. If your survey is simple, a free service is likely fine. Complex surveys may require a paid service. • **Determine how you will share the survey link** with families (for example, email, text, QR code). • **Identify staff who will program the survey.** • **Identify staff who will manage the survey,** including checking response rates and data quality.	• **Format the survey** so that: – Instructions to respondents are clear. – Respondents enter responses in a standardized way. • **Determine how to distribute and collect surveys** (especially if they are anonymous). • **Determine how to enter data from completed surveys** and who will be responsible.

Designing your survey

- Identify a target survey length (how long it takes to complete). The shorter the survey is, the easier it is for families to complete and the more responses you can expect to receive.
- Based on what you want to learn from families, draft survey questions. See the next page for an example questionnaire.
  - Ask questions in the simplest way possible that aligns with your learning goals.
  - Ask questions in an order that makes sense to the person completing the survey. Group similar topics together. Ask more-sensitive questions at the end of the survey.
  - Structure questions in a way that is easy to interpret responses.
  - Ask more closed-ended questions (select from a list of answers) than open-ended questions (write a response).
  - Avoid surveys with many medium- and high-burden questions (for example, questions that ask respondents to write, assess, evaluate, compare, or reference outside information).
  - Learn more about designing your survey and writing survey questions in the Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Questionnaires brief and the Checklist to Evaluate the Quality of Questions.
- Have a few people who are unfamiliar with the survey pre-test the survey to ensure questions are easy to understand, it is easy to complete, and it takes about the amount of time you expect.
  - Revise the survey based on the feedback you receive from the people who pre-test the survey.

Example survey: Improving orientation

Welcome to the [program name] Orientation Feedback Survey. We want to know how we can improve our orientation session for new participants. Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with us today.

Your responses are anonymous. Taking this survey is optional. Your benefits will not be affected by your decision to take this survey or by anything you share in this survey.

This survey should take less than five minutes to complete.

1. Have you attended an orientation session in the past month?

   ◯ Yes

   ◯ No [will take respondents to the end of the survey]

2. Which of the following topics were covered in your orientation session? *Select all that apply*.

   ☐ Program goals

   ☐ Program rules

   ☐ Available referral services

   ☐ Role of your case manager

   ☐ Participation requirements

   ☐ Other: _____

3. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

   The orientation session helped me understand what to expect from this program.

   ◯ Strongly agree

   ◯ Agree

   ◯ Disagree

   ◯ Strongly disagree

4. How many days did you wait to meet with your case manager after attending orientation?

   |__|__| days

5. What could we change about orientation to make it more useful and welcoming?

   _____

Thank you for completing this survey! Please place your survey in the survey bin at the reception desk.

Survey tips

- ← Explain the purpose of the survey
- ← Explicitly tell families whether their responses are anonymous or whether their answers can affect their program standing or benefits
- ← Tell families how long the survey will take to complete
- ← Responses can be yes/no (low burden)
- ← Responses can be a list of options where respondents can choose more than one option (low burden)
  - Include an "other" option where respondents can write in an answer if you are unsure if your list of response options is comprehensive
- ← Responses can be scales or on a continuum (medium burden)
  - Scales should have an even number of "positive" and "negative" response options
  - You can add an "N/A" option if the question is not relevant to all respondents
- ← Responses can be numbers (low burden)
- ← Responses can be open-ended (high burden)
- ← Thank participants for their time and provide instructions for submitting their completed survey

Focus Group Tips for TANF and Child Support Programs[1]

Focus groups offer a useful way to engage families for feedback about how to improve your program when you want to:

- Hear from several families at once
- Offer families an opportunity to react and respond to one another

Focus groups are guided conversations about a topic or set of topics with a small group of people (usually 5–8). They typically last 60–90 minutes.

Considerations for when to use focus groups

Use focus groups when . . .	Do not use focus groups when . . .
✓ You're looking for a broad range of detailed views	× You want to learn about personal or sensitive topics
✓ You want to capture this broad range of views over a short period of time	× You want to collect information from a large group of people over a short period of time
✓ You want to capture lived experiences and lessons learned	× You want to understand the "average" or "typical" experience of a large group of people

Preparing for focus groups

General planning

- **Identify what you want to learn about improving your program** from the focus group and what types of families can provide that information.
  - Consider families with diverse perspectives and experiences with the program.
- **Draft a discussion guide** to structure the conversation.
  - See the last page of this tool for an example discussion guide.

To the extent possible, select a focus group facilitator who is not in a position of power over families.

Families should see the facilitator as neutral and not as someone who can affect a family's standing or benefits in the program.

- **Identify who is most appropriate to facilitate the focus group** and who will take notes.
  - Consider providing time for the facilitator to attend a training if no staff have facilitation experience.
- **Decide whether you will record the conversation**, but consider skipping this step if you expect that families may be nervous or hesitant about being recorded.
- **Develop a plan for sharing next steps with families** at the end of each focus group.
  - This may be as simple as describing high-level takeaways from the conversation and asking if you missed anything to sharing how you will report back to families the outcomes resulting from their feedback and when.

Logistics

- **Identify a time and venue comfortable for families** and make it easy for them to participate.
  - Consider community settings if they are more appropriate and identify any additional supports families need to be able to attend (for example, child care or a meal). Focus groups longer than 60 minutes may be difficult for families to attend.

[1] Office of Population Affairs. "Focus Group Tip Sheet." 2020.

- **Identify how you will compensate families** for their time and how the compensation approach you select might impact the benefits or eligibility of participants.
  - Ideally, select an approach that will not affect families' eligibility or benefits. If that is not possible, clearly explain this to families before they agree to participate.
- **Plan how you will recruit families to participate**. Consider asking trusted community leaders to weigh in on recruitment plans and to potentially support recruitment efforts.
- **Develop recruitment materials** that explain:
  - Reasons for gathering input
  - How the input will be used
  - Time commitment and compensation for participating, including potential impact of the compensation on their benefits or eligibility
  - Who is gathering the input
  - Answers to frequently asked questions that address potential concerns families might have about participating

Leading focus groups

An important decision to make is whether you will hold the focus group in person or virtually.

- In-person focus groups make it easier to connect with families, read their body language during the conversation, and engage them in the conversation. Families do not need technology to participate.
- Virtual focus groups can be more convenient for families because they do not have to travel to participate. Virtual focus groups rely on families' access to virtual meeting platforms, such as Zoom, to participate.

We describe additional logistical considerations for in-person and virtual focus groups below.

Logistical considerations for in-person versus virtual focus groups

In-person focus groups	Virtual focus groups
• Reserve a private and quiet space that is large enough for the group to participate comfortably. • If you are planning to record, test the recording device before the focus group and make sure it is set up in a space where all voices will be audible. • Prepare for the focus group early and arrive at the meeting space before the focus group begins to arrange seating and make the space comfortable for the group.	• Identify a virtual meeting platform that will be easy for families to access and use. • Share easy-to-understand instructions (with screenshots of key functions) with the participants about how to use the platform. • Include time to support technical issues before and during the focus group. • Ask participants to join with video, if possible.

- Regardless of whether you choose in-person or virtual, **facilitating focus groups is a skill to develop.** Although we include some tips to the right, we encourage staff to observe a trained focus group facilitator or seek out more information on facilitating focus groups.
  - This Focus Group Tip Sheet has additional information on conducting focus groups.

Tips for facilitating focus groups

- Manage your time. Let participants know when you need to move to a new question.
- Encourage quieter participants to share.
- Ask only one question at a time.
- Look for visual cues of agreement, disagreement, or confusion.
- Be willing to ask questions out of order to follow the flow of the conversation.

Example focus group discussion guide: Improving case management services

Thank you so much for joining us today. My name is [facilitator's name], and I am [facilitator's role within organization/program]. I'm going to be leading today's conversation. This is [notetaker's name]. They are [notetaker's role within organization/ program] and will be taking notes. We appreciate the time you have set aside to speak with us today and will not keep you longer than 60 minutes.

Today we'd like to learn more about your experiences with your case manager. We are trying to understand how we can improve our services and how our case managers work with families and connect them to supports. We plan to use your feedback to identify what we are doing well and where we could improve. What you share today is going to be very helpful during this process. We plan to summarize what we learn today and share it with [name groups who will hear the feedback]. After hearing your feedback, we will [provide overview of next steps after completing focus groups].

We will not use your names in anything that we share with program staff or publicly, and your name will not be attached to anything you say today. Your case or benefits will not be affected by anything you share. We encourage you to be honest so that we are able to learn from your experiences.

We would like to record the conversation today, so that we don't miss anything in our notes. We won't share the recording with anyone and will delete it as soon as we have finished writing our notes. Is everyone comfortable with us recording the conversation? (*Press* Record *if yes*.)

1. To get us started, let's go around and have you all introduce yourselves. Please share your first name and how long you've been involved in [program name].
2. Before you met your case manager, what were your expectations for working with your case manager? What did you think they would do?
3. Tell me about your first meeting with your case manager. What did you discuss? How did the meeting make you feel?
4. How helpful has your case manager been in connecting you with the services and supports you need or want? Are there ways to make it easier for you to get the referrals you need?
5. How easy or difficult is it to communicate with your case manager? What makes it easy? What makes it difficult?
6. How would you describe your relationship with your case manager? What would you like to be different?
7. How has your relationship with your case manager affected your experience in [program]?
8. If you could change one thing about what your case manager does or how they work with you, what would it be? Why?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share that you have not yet shared today?

Those are all the questions I have. Thank you again so much for your time. Your feedback will be incredibly helpful as we work to improve our case management services! [Share details about how participants will be compensated. Share details about how you will use the feedback and next steps in program improvement process.]

Discussion guide tips

Modify this conversation guide for your program and topic of interest!

- Introduce yourself and commit to a time limit for the discussion
- Explain the purpose of the conversation and how you will use the information
- Explicitly tell families whether their names will be shared or whether what they say can affect their program standing or benefits
- Ask for permission to record
- Start with a warm-up question that is easy for everyone to answer
- Ask open-ended questions ("how," "why," "tell me about," "to what extent," etc.)
- Keep questions simple, using language that is easy to understand
- Aim for 5–8 substantive questions discussion questions for a 60-minute conversation
- Ask questions that could be more sensitive later in the conversation
- End the discussion with a broad wrap-up question
- Thank participants for their time and compensate them
- Share details about how you will use feedback and program improvement next steps

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