



# Enhancing Cultural Responsiveness in Social Service Agencies

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## What's Inside?

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### 1. What's here?

This brief presents an overview of cultural responsiveness and how social service agencies can apply different tools at various organizational levels to create more appropriate and effective programs and interventions.

### 2. Who should read this brief?

Social service agency staff should read this brief if they are seeking a broader understanding of how to best serve diverse communities; the information here can serve as a resource for their process of self-reflection and learning.

## Introduction

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Social service agencies must continually reevaluate their programs and services to ensure that they respond to the current environmental and social context in which clients live and that they are supporting all clients, regardless of cultural, socioeconomic, personal identity, or other differences. Developing programs and services that are accessible and responsive to different cultures is not new. In the late 1980s, Cross (1988) and colleagues called on systems of care for children and families to improve their competence in serving different cultural groups. Since then, the cultural responsiveness movement has been strengthened by a growing recognition of the striking disparities in health and social outcomes and opportunities across marginalized groups and a commitment by many in the public and private sectors to reduce these disparities (see Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2016, and Allen & Spitzer, 2016).

This movement has become more important as the country has grown more diverse related to race, ethnicity, religion, primary language, and sexual orientation and is expected to further diversify. Census data from 2020 show that the overall racial and ethnic diversity of the country has increased, with Black, Indigenous, and other people of color representing over 40 percent of the population (Jensen et al., 2021). While the majority of Americans identify as Christian, young Americans are more religiously diverse compared with older cohorts (Public Religion Research Institute, 2021). Nationally, over 20 percent of people speak a language other than English at home, and that number is often even larger in major cities (U.S. Census Bureau). Across racial and ethnic groups, Americans, particularly young adults, increasingly identify as LGBTQIA+ (Brown, A.). The client base for social services organizations will increasingly operate in a world of racial, ethnic, linguistic, sexual, gender, religious, and other diversity.

Over the past 25 years, health and social disparities between marginalized groups and the dominant culture have persisted and in some cases widened (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Inequity in social and health outcomes and opportunities among some marginalized groups are attributable to structural racism, poverty, and other socioeconomic stressors; limited access to health and social services; high rates of attrition from services; low rates of follow-up; and poor quality of services (Brach & Fraserirector, 2000; Hacker & Houry, 2022). Current evidence across disciplines strongly suggests that prevalent models of social service provision, which largely reflect White, middle class values, do not effectively meet the needs of diverse groups and can create and maintain mistrust between service providers and potential clients (Hoytt, et al., 2022; Kirmayer & Jarvis, 2019; Larson & Ngo, 2017; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2011). Delivering culturally responsive services remains a goal and a highly promising approach to promoting positive outcomes among diverse groups and ultimately to reducing these disparities.

In this context, this brief provides an overview of cross-cultural competence, cultural responsiveness, and cultural humility to provide a foundation for organizations serving children and families to review their practices and take action to deliver higher quality care to diverse populations. While these concepts have most often been used in the context of racial and ethnic diversity, they are also applicable to identities derived from national origin, language, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

## Definitions

**Culture** is understood as “a cumulative body of learned and shared behavior, values, customs and beliefs common to a particular group or society” (Frierson et al., 2002, 63).

**Cultural competence** is “a developmental process in which one achieves increasing levels of awareness, knowledge, and skills along a continuum, improving one’s capacity to work and communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations” (Office of Minority Health, n.d.).

**Cultural humility** is “a reflective process of understanding one’s biases and privileges, managing power imbalances, and maintaining a stance that is open to others in relation to aspects of their cultural identity that are most important to them” (Office of Minority Health, n.d.).

**Cultural responsiveness** is the application of a strengths-based approach to service delivery rooted in respect and appreciation for the role of culture in the individual’s and family’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

## Moving From Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility Toward Cultural Responsiveness

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Numerous fields, such as psychology, social work, counseling, nursing, education, anthropology, and sociology contribute to a robust body of literature on the topic of cultural responsiveness. However, there is no universally accepted definition of this concept. Many similar terms have been introduced in the field, each with slight differences in definition. Common terms include cultural competence, cultural humility, cultural sensitivity, cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, culturally responsive care, cultural brokering, cultural proficiency, and cultural encounters, but practitioners and scholars have increasingly moved toward cultural humility and cultural responsiveness as the preferred terms and concepts. This brief focuses on three terms: cultural competence, cultural humility, and cultural responsiveness.

### Cultural Competence

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines cultural competence as a “developmental process in which one achieves increasing levels of awareness, knowledge, and skills along a continuum, improving one’s capacity to work and communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations” (Office of Minority Health, n.d.). Cultural competence does not generalize across cultures, and practitioners need to increase awareness, knowledge, and skills for each culture with which they interact. It requires that individuals and organizations value diversity, have the capacity for cultural self-assessment, be conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact, have institutionalized cultural knowledge (for whichever culture one interacts with), and have developed adaptations to service delivery that reflect an understanding of cultural diversity (Center for Child and Human Development, n.d.)

Previous discussions often used “cultural competence” as the term of choice to describe working to provide more effective services to diverse populations. However, since the term emerged in the late 1980s, the conversation about cultural competence has become more nuanced. A central critique of “cultural competence” is that it implies a point at which one becomes competent: an endpoint when one has attained enough cultural knowledge or “mastered” a culture. This definition ignores how culture shifts and changes, the nuances of individual experiences, and the need to constantly learn. By focusing on presumed cultural-level knowledge and assigning people to categories, the term “cultural competence” can lead to stereotyping, assumptions, and further disempowerment of marginalized persons.

### Cultural Humility

Practitioners and scholars are increasingly emphasizing the need for cultural humility rather than cultural competence. Cultural humility is an attitude of lifelong self-reflection, eliminating assumptions, and immersion in “learning and respecting the experiences of clients from their perspectives” (Nguyen et al., 2021). Through this lens, we value people as experts of their culture and experiences. This framework has no endpoint. Instead, it emphasizes the dynamic process of learning, unlearning, and relearning as we continually consider our biases, positionality, and power imbalances.

## Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness is the *application* of approaches such as cultural competence or cultural humility to deliver services rooted in respect and appreciation for the role of culture in the individual's and family's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Culturally responsive services value the voices, knowledge, and expertise of systematically minoritized and underrepresented groups and seek to continually consider positionality and reflect and learn. Organizations and staff can be culturally competent and have cultural humility, but when we apply them in our interactions, organizations, staff, and programs become culturally responsive.

This brief focuses on cultural responsiveness as we examine how service providers can put these skills into action and more effectively serve diverse groups. Figure 1 shows the main dimensions of cultural responsiveness and how they are related. This approach builds on prior work developed to reduce racial and ethnic disparities by incorporating cultural responsiveness (Balcazar et al., 2010). Figure 1 integrates four key dimensions commonly discussed in the literature:

- ▶ A **cognitive** component emphasizes *critical awareness* (i.e., awareness of one's biases) and *knowledge* (i.e., understanding of a specific cultural group's history, religion, historical context and beliefs) relevant to the well-being of diverse children and families.
- ▶ A **behavioral** component emphasizes the ability to put *skills* into practice to build trust and effectively communicate with and serve diverse children and families.
- ▶ An **attitudes** component emphasizes *beliefs and values* and reflects a motivation to eliminate disparities and a desire to engage with individuals, value the voices of diverse children and families, and practice self-reflection.
- ▶ An **organizational** component emphasizes contextual issues and support for culturally responsive practices from an organization committed to diversity and innovation to meet the needs of diverse children and families. This dimension is the environment underlying the first three dimensions when applied to social service agencies.

As figure 1 illustrates, cultural responsiveness is an ongoing and fluid process. At the core of this process are values such as a desire to learn, self-awareness and self-critique, empathy and openness, avoiding presumptions and assumptions, continuous reflection, and seeing community members as experts. An effective organizational context supports putting culturally responsive knowledge, skills, and attitudes into action.

**Figure 1. Components of Cultural Responsiveness**

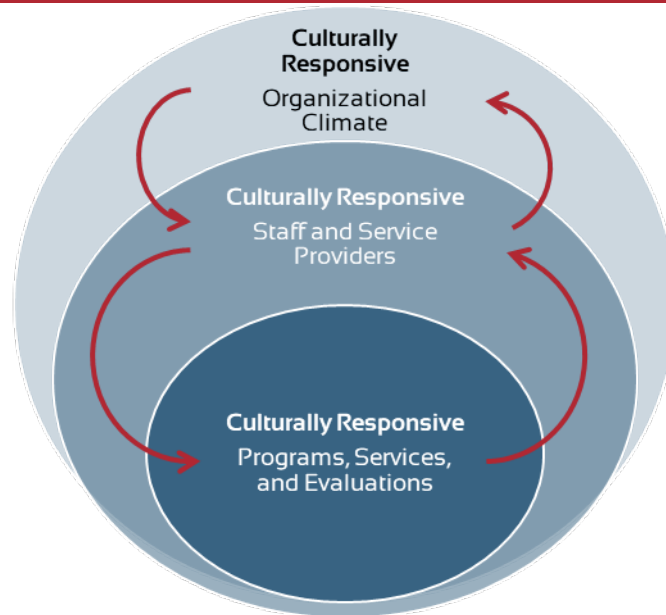


## Cultural Responsiveness Framework for Social Services Agencies

How is cultural responsiveness achieved within broader systems of care for children and families? We propose a framework (see figure 2) in which cultural responsiveness at the broadest level of the organization influences cultural responsiveness at the staff level and ultimately at the level of program design, implementation, and evaluation. This framework draws on the well-supported ecological systems theory that emphasizes the dynamic interaction between each layer of the environment (Lecca et al., 1998). Within this “whole organization” approach, individuals are nested within complex social systems (e.g., service delivery), and each level influences the other.

In our proposed framework, no level is necessarily the starting point; instead, cultural responsiveness can begin anywhere to influence the entire system. Without buy-in at all levels, though, certain elements of the organization will remain entrenched in previous practices, limiting the scope of any efforts to enhance cultural responsiveness. The framework is most effective when each level agrees that cultural responsiveness is a necessary component of service delivery.

**Figure 2. Cultural Responsiveness in Social Services Agencies**



As figure 2 shows, cultural responsiveness at the organizational level promotes ongoing awareness, knowledge, skill development, and attitudes of cultural humility among staff and then programs. This relationship does not flow downward only. Organizations are dynamic and interactive environments where each level can influence the others. Ideally, an organization supports and reinforces cultural responsiveness among staff. At the same time, culturally responsive staff contribute to enhancing practices at the organizational level. In parallel, culturally responsive staff are more effective at engaging and serving a diverse consumer base. Diverse consumers help staff attune their cultural responsiveness through opportunities for self-reflection. In the following section, we will explore how to increase cultural responsiveness at each of these levels.

## Promoting Cultural Responsiveness Across Organization, Staff, and Programming

At the organizational, staff, and program levels, different techniques and strategies can be used to foster culturally responsive services. The following subsections provide general descriptions of the levels and examples of potential strategies as a starting point. They are generalized for a wide array of organizations serving different populations. Additional resources provided here can help individual service providers tailor their culturally responsive services and strategies.

Organizations should embed cultural responsiveness in their mission statement and reflect how it applies to their work. Here is an example from a service organization in New Mexico:

**“Mission:** To improve the health, education and well being of the people of Northern New Mexico through family-centered approaches deeply rooted in the multicultural traditions of their communities” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

## Cultural Responsiveness in Organizations and Systems

To enhance cultural responsiveness at the organizational level, organizations can begin by developing mission and vision statements that embrace the concept and identify self-reflection and listening as core values (Allen & Spitzer, 2016). In this effort, organizations should consider who is involved in the development of their mission and vision statements (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). If community members are not already represented, hire or partner with them; these experts of their experience and culture can design statements that better reflect the community.

Along with the mission and vision statements, organizations should create an action plan aligned with standards enforced through systems of accountability. In this action plan, organizations may incorporate various practices to promote organizational cultural responsiveness, such as—

- ▶ Cultural responsiveness training for administrators and staff
- ▶ Recruitment, mentoring, promotion, and retention of diverse staff across levels
- ▶ Accountability systems to better understand what services or practices are or are not working
- ▶ Investment in interpreters, translation services, and community health workers to help deliver social services based in community languages and contexts
- ▶ The inclusion of family and community members in leadership structures, program design, and evaluation processes as experts (Sue, 2001)

When creating standards and accountability systems, consider how to incorporate flexibility. To be more culturally responsive, these accountability systems should be adaptable and implemented in ways that empower staff to be responsive to individual client needs.

Practices to promote organizational cultural responsiveness work in tandem. A mission statement alone is hardly effective if there are no standards or accountability systems used to implement it. Recruitment of diverse staff is not of benefit unless these staff are supported, have pathways to progress, and can influence the organization at higher levels. Through consistent, thorough implementation of

appropriate organizational policies and practices, organizations foster cultural responsiveness at the highest level and lay the groundwork for cultural responsiveness of individual staff, programs, and evaluations.

When developing these practices, organizations must also be aware that the practices will not work as intended if they are poorly conceived. For example, some staff training programs may reinforce stereotypes or generalizations instead of being grounded in cultural humility. Organizations should continue to involve community members as experts of their culture and hire or partner with them to validate the practices. These partners will be able to advise on whether the plan is appropriate and should be implemented and whether it achieves the desired effects if put into practice (Center for Community Health and Development, n.d.).



Future studies are needed to identify the effectiveness of strategies at increasing cultural responsiveness at an organizational level and which are the most promising. Most studies on cultural responsiveness *at the organizational level* to date are descriptive and observational, with suggested best practices based on individual experiences. Organizations should be prepared to adapt their practices as the field grows and produces more detailed studies in the future.

To further guide service providers, we offer examples of strategies for enhancing cultural responsiveness at an organizational level in table 1. We highlight strategies based in theory and in some cases are supported by recent empirical studies and can be applied in different areas of an organization’s operations (e.g., mission, organizational culture, accountability systems, general practices, staff recruitment, physical environment).

**Table 1. Strategies for Promoting Cultural Responsiveness at Organizational or Systems Level**

Area of Operation	Strategies
Mission and vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Develop vision and mission statements that embrace cultural responsiveness and connect this concept to the organization’s larger goals</li> <li>■ Identify self-reflection, listening, and avoiding presumptions and assumptions as core values (e.g., cultural humility and corresponding attitudes)</li> </ul>
Organizational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Foster a culture of learning and humility</li> <li>■ Form collaborative partnerships with communities served by the organization</li> <li>■ Engage in needs assessments of and with communities served by the organization</li> <li>■ Provide ongoing workforce development and staff trainings in cultural competence, humility, and responsiveness</li> <li>■ Create forums and other opportunities for ongoing dialogue for staff to self-reflect and consider what is and is not working when serving clients</li> <li>■ Elevate the voices of advocates from the communities served by the organization and follow their leadership in advocacy efforts</li> </ul>
Flexible accountability systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Engage in self-assessment of cultural responsiveness practices via self-ratings; consider anonymizing this process to empower staff to deeply reflect</li> <li>■ Collect feedback from clients and the community being served on what is and is not working at the organization and on staff responsiveness</li> <li>■ Collect data to document access to services, participation, and retention in services</li> <li>■ Supplement quantitative data with qualitative data from staff and participants to better understand findings</li> </ul>
General practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Work with consultants, such as cultural brokers, religious leaders, or other community leaders who have in-depth knowledge of the community or the culture</li> <li>■ Properly compensate community partners for their time, knowledge, and expertise when they assist the organization</li> <li>■ Follow culturally responsive engagement and outreach practices, such as participation in local community events, home visits, and walk-in appointments</li> <li>■ Consider varying communication needs of different communities and offer several options to communicate, such as in person, by phone, in writing, and online; ask individuals their preferred method of communication</li> <li>■ Provide translation services to all children and families who need them</li> <li>■ Plan for and allow extended family members, friends, and other caretakers or supporters to attend appointments and other agency events</li> <li>■ Use screening and assessment tools validated with members of the local community</li> <li>■ Encourage staff to engage in cultural immersion in community</li> </ul>



Area of Operation	Strategies
Staffing practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruit, mentor, and promote staff who represent the community, and ideally come from the community, at all levels</li> <li>Hire staff from the community to help with engagement and outreach</li> <li>Recruit well-trained, experienced translators to provide translation and interpretation services</li> </ul>
Physical environment and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create a familiar, welcoming physical environment by depicting community members in promotional materials and displaying artwork from local artists and community members</li> <li>Arrange reception and meeting areas to accommodate differently sized groups</li> <li>Provide materials in multiple languages</li> <li>Share materials that connect clients to other services, community groups, and affinity groups, such as posting flyers from relevant community organizations on a bulletin board</li> </ul>

### Cultural Responsiveness of Individual Staff and Service Providers

At the individual level, cultural responsiveness is rooted in ongoing self-reflection and cultural humility. Staff may use self-assessment tools to reflect on aspects of service provision they may not consider otherwise, such as the physical environment they contribute to and personal communication styles. We include examples of self-assessment tools in the Additional Resources section.

In addition to this self-reflection, staff should remain open to learning from the communities they serve, with respect and appreciation for cultural and individual characteristics. In parallel, service providers should seek to learn from their clients. They may use cultural immersion, active listening, and asking questions to better understand the experiences, goals, and needs of clients related to the service being provided (Purnell, 2002).

Providers that intentionally maintain self-awareness and knowledge prepare themselves to better offer services informed by a client’s characteristics, circumstances, and culture. Culturally responsive service providers are also better equipped to help clients and their family members advocate for themselves within the organization by listening to and lifting up their voices.

Future studies are needed to identify the most promising strategies for increasing cultural responsiveness among individuals. In the interim, table 2 details specific practices that current evidence suggests may enhance staff cultural responsiveness.

**Table 2. Strategies for Promoting Cultural Responsiveness Among Individual Staff**

Areas of Individual Ability	Strategies
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Value the voices, knowledge, expertise, culture, and experience of individuals</li> <li>Listen and engage to hear and understand rather than to control or judge</li> <li>Practice empathy and openness, centering the experiences of the client and setting aside individual ego and experience as the service provider</li> </ul>
Awareness and self-reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage in ongoing self-reflection about your culture, experience, and potential biases</li> <li>Reflect on your preparedness to serve communities from different backgrounds</li> <li>Participate in community events and activities</li> <li>Participate in regular cultural competence, humility, and responsiveness trainings</li> <li>Be willing to continually learn, ask questions, and remain open to changing behavior</li> </ul>

Areas of Individual Ability	Strategies
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Stay informed on scientific evidence relevant to the evaluation and treatment of systematically minoritized groups</li> <li>▪ Critically evaluate and determine fit between assessment or intervention and cultural backgrounds and/or lived experience of communities</li> <li>▪ Gain knowledge about the culture (values, beliefs, and practices) and the history of communities you serve</li> <li>▪ Consult with community members to better understand how culture and experiences may play a role in service provision, such as community views on health, disability, and disease</li> <li>▪ Consult with individual clients to better understand how their culture and experiences affect their interactions with you or their receipt of service; remain aware that this may not fit your community-level understanding</li> </ul>
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Strengthen relationship-building and communication skills, including how to address a range of community members and how to use and interpret nonverbal cues</li> <li>▪ Develop the skill of working with a translator, if applicable</li> <li>▪ Refine skills of engaging and working with family members, friends, and other community members who may accompany the client in services</li> <li>▪ Build the ability to partner with community leaders</li> <li>▪ Try new strategies when conventional strategies do not work</li> <li>▪ Continually ask questions, practice active listening, and engage in self-reflection</li> </ul>

## Culturally Responsive Programs

Many existing health and social service programs have been developed without appropriate consideration of the cultural needs, preferences, and differences of the populations served (Bernal & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2012). As a result, many of these programs warrant cultural adaptations to increase the compatibility among the programs and the language, patterns of behavior, values, and experiences of the communities they serve. Some studies on culturally adapted interventions suggest these programs work and, when compared with nonadapted interventions, produce better outcomes (Bernal & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2012; Sheila et al., 2015). Although evidence is limited regarding when or what types of adaptations are most critical for improving outcomes, successfully adapted programs use quantitative and qualitative data to guide decision-making and engage in an ongoing process of change in close partnership with community members.

When developing or selecting culturally responsive programs, service organizations should consider whether the program model is evidence-informed and matches the needs of the targeted community. If an evidence-informed approach to serving the targeted community is lacking, programs shown to be effective with one population may need to be adapted.

In all cases, adapting programs should include ongoing, in-depth consultation with community experts and members of the targeted population. Many studies show this type of community engagement—focused on real power sharing, collaborative partnerships, and bidirectional learning—improves program results (Sheila et al., 2015). Representatives from the target population who are attuned to the unique needs of their communities will more readily recognize the incompatibility between a program and the cultural context of children and families being served and be able to suggest changes. As a result, these communities may also develop more trust for the program.

## Culturally Responsive Evaluations

In recent years, evaluators and program staff have become increasingly aware of the need to incorporate equity throughout the evaluation process. Rather than considering equity as one step in the process, evaluators have reframed equity as an *approach* to evaluation. Equity is central to the way evaluations are designed and implemented.

Cultural responsiveness should also be incorporated into program evaluation design and implementation (Gutuskey, 2022). By using a culturally responsive approach and grounding their work in the voices of community members, evaluators help ensure the nature of a problem or need is adequately understood and appropriate services are selected.

Culturally responsive programs consider these questions:

- Does the program have the intended effects? If so, for whom?
- Is the program evidence-informed?
- Does the program match the needs of the target community, as described by that community?
- Are the program design and implementation effort led by staff most familiar with the community, in close partnership with community members and leaders?
- How do representative members of the target population recommend staff adapt the program? What is their recommended approach to make necessary changes?

To meet the standards of a culturally responsive evaluation, evaluations should—

- ▶ Tap into unique cultural experiences (e.g., acculturation, acculturative stress, racial socialization, discrimination) and knowledge that may be relevant to the health and well-being of the community.
- ▶ Use measures with established psychometric properties (i.e., reliability, validity) and measurement equivalence with the group of interest.
- ▶ Validate and test surveys, interviews, or focus groups with members of the community, and use the appropriate language or dialect.
- ▶ Consider communication styles, preferences, and other characteristics of the target group (such as literacy, digital literacy, or education level).
- ▶ Offer feedback in culturally appropriate ways.
- ▶ Considering using a mixed methods approach by using quantitative and qualitative methods, such as focus groups and open-ended interviews, to engage a wide variety of individuals and capture feedback the evaluation team may not have considered asking about.

Beyond their immediate use, evaluations that provide an accurate and comprehensive portrayal of diverse children and families may serve as an important source of knowledge for the service provider, the organization, and the wider community.

## Examples of Culturally Responsive Services Across Levels

Throughout this brief, we have included descriptions and strategies to foster cultural responsiveness at each environmental level: organizational, staff, and programs and evaluation. In table 3, we also offer example scenarios of culturally responsive services at each level. We contrast these scenarios with

examples of conventional cultural awareness in services that are only surface-level nods to culture, rather than culturally responsive services.

**Table 3. Comparison of Conventional Expressions of Cultural Awareness in Services and Culturally Responsive Services**

Conventional Expressions of Cultural Awareness in Services	Culturally Responsive Services
<b>Organizational and systems level</b>	
<p>The organization is redesigning its community food bank program to try to meet the needs of its clients. More and more clients are recent immigrants, so the organization encouraged program staff to research the cultures of clients’ nations of origin. Program staff have identified some common national dishes and have a general awareness of different religious dietary restrictions. The organization decides to try to provide lamb instead of chicken as a protein in their food boxes. Unfortunately, the organization cannot regularly find lamb at low cost, so it continues to provide chicken and does not implement any changes.</p>	<p>The organization is embarking on its annual design of the community food bank program. Recently, more immigrants have been settling in the area, and the organization knows it needs to consider this growing community in its program design. It asks its community advisory board, made up of program beneficiaries from a variety of backgrounds, to provide their thoughts on how the program could be more responsive. Program staff also provide feedback forms and hold focus groups with clients who have recently immigrated. Through these processes, the organization learns many families struggle the most when cooking during religious holidays. Families share they are not particularly interested in receiving food such as turkey at Thanksgiving; they would prefer to receive extra food or specialty items during their religious holidays.</p>
<p>A client is filling out paperwork to enroll in the program and notices the only gender options are male or female. They approach the receptionist, who tells them the agency can add a note to their file with a preferred name and their correct pronouns. Later, the client receives a text update from the agency with their enrollment status. The automatic text includes their legal, not preferred, name.</p>	<p>A client approaches a receptionist for paperwork and notices he is wearing a nametag that includes his name and pronouns. The client finds free response fields in their paperwork for legal name, preferred name, pronouns, and gender. On the table, they see a sign with a QR code and website URL for an online form they can use if they need to update their information in the future. On the wall, they see flyers for different LGBTQIA+ community groups, including one for nonbinary parents.</p>
<b>Staff and service provider</b>	
<p>A client approaches the front desk, and the receptionist asks her in English to complete some paperwork. Realizing the client does not understand her, the receptionist asks a service provider with basic college-level Spanish knowledge to speak to her.</p> <p>The service provider briefly explains the paperwork to the client and offers to call in a translator.</p> <p>The client, unsure about what was said and worried the translator represents someone official who may ask her difficult questions, takes the paperwork and thanks the service provider warmly. She leaves the agency and does not return.</p>	<p>A client approaches a Spanish-speaking receptionist who hands her some paperwork.</p> <p>The client, whose functional literacy is limited even in Spanish, hesitates, and the receptionist asks whether she would like a staff person to sit down and go through the paperwork with her “con confianza” (with trust).</p> <p>The client agrees and spends 30 minutes with an older woman she recognizes from the neighborhood. Before leaving, she signs up her children for child care and enrolls herself in a class on maternal health.</p>

Conventional Expressions of Cultural Awareness in Services	Culturally Responsive Services
<p>A client walks into the agency and asks if he can schedule an appointment. The staff member explains that they typically schedule appointments by phone and gives him a pamphlet with instructions on how to schedule an appointment in several languages.</p> <p>The client calls the phone line the next day, but he has difficulty hearing and understanding the automated prompts to schedule an appointment. He does not schedule an appointment.</p>	<p>A client walks into the agency and asks if he can schedule an appointment. A staff member helps him schedule the appointment on the spot. The staff member asks if the client has any other friends or family who may need an appointment, and the client says yes.</p> <p>The staff member then gives the client a flyer sharing the agency’s phone line, online appointment link, and hours of operation. He tells the client that his friends or family can use any of these methods to book an appointment, and if they have any questions, he or another staff member will assist them.</p>
Programs and evaluation	
<p>After piloting cooking classes for parents of children enrolled in child care, the agency evaluators notice enrollment is lower for the Spanish-language class. Educators indicate participants did not return after the first class because of a lack of interest in the topics. The agency decides to eliminate the Spanish-language cooking class.</p>	<p>After piloting cooking classes for parents of children enrolled in child care, the agency evaluators notice enrollment is lower for the Spanish-language class. The agency follows up in Spanish with former participants to inquire about program access and satisfaction and hosts a listening session for community members to provide input on cooking classes, nutrition, and other topics relevant to the class’s aims. The agency discovers there is a desire for the class, but locations are inconvenient for many community members who would prefer the Spanish-language class.</p>
<p>The organization is holding workshops on mental health in several locations in the city. Program staff want to create a space for Black participants to engage, learn, and share with their community. They identify a community center in a predominantly Black neighborhood and schedule a workshop, post flyers, and send emails to clients who live in the area. On the day of the workshop, some people join but not as many as staff had hoped.</p>	<p>The organization is planning workshops on mental health and wants them to be responsive to a variety of needs. Recognizing the community members are experts, program staff consult with community leaders and identify several locations for workshops, including a predominantly Black neighborhood. With their advice, program staff find a central meeting space, community hubs where they can hand out flyers, and community members who are interested in helping facilitate the meeting. They work with these community members and Black mental health advocates to tailor the workshop to local needs. Many people join the meeting and tell program staff they had heard about it through friends or family.</p>

## Conclusions and Considerations

Cultural responsiveness affords social service agencies the opportunity to better serve diverse communities. It calls for an ongoing commitment to a set of values and an attitude of cultural humility, learning, and growth. It asks us to continually improve our cultural competence—our awareness, knowledge, and skills—through self-assessment, active listening, and consultation with community members as experts. Across disciplines, research suggests this approach ultimately helps improve the

experience and outcomes for diverse populations. Throughout this brief, we have highlighted broad strategies and examples that can serve as starting points as social service agencies strive to become more culturally responsive. These strategies are not exhaustive, and the resources included are intended to help you continue to learn more.

## Acknowledgments

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Adapted from—

Calzada, E., & Suarez-Balcazar, Y. (2014). *Enhancing cultural competence in social service agencies: A promising approach to serving diverse children and families* (OPRE Report 2014-31). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation.

## Additional Resources

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### *Individual cultural responsiveness and self-assessments*

Center for Child and Human Development. (n.d.). *Useful steps for planning and implementing self-assessment*. Georgetown University, National Center for Cultural Competence. <https://nccc.georgetown.edu/assessments/steps.php>

Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence. (2010). *Cultural competence assessment tools*. New York Psychiatric Institute. <https://nyculturalcompetence.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CC-Assessment-Tools.pdf> (a summary of cultural competence instruments)

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### *Culturally responsive programs*

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