

Foundational Engagement Tip Sheet

Consider **who can paint the picture** of the issue from a value perspective and how they can be engaged in co-creation and problem-solving through the development of a meaningful partnership.

Identify stakeholders and potential partners:

- ❖ *Who **experience the issue** or who play a valuable role in supporting those that experience the issue (e.g., foster parents, youth, service providers, birth parents, clergy).*
 - ❖ *Who are **current stakeholders** in the system from various roles.*
 - ❖ *Who can fill or speak to **current stakeholder gaps** (e.g., The agency is exploring improvements to services for transition-aged youth, but none are at the table to speak to what would be most helpful).*
 - ❖ ***Who are accessible** via various engagement strategies (e.g., current or former local foster youth may be easier to access than distant or disengaged youth).*
 - ❖ *Who bring valuable, unique or new **resources, skills, or perspectives to the partnership** (e.g., group home staff may help explore challenges in serving older youth).*
-

Broad and Inclusive Engagement

Explore external engagement. Start with your natural stakeholder partners in the work and ask, “who else?”

It is important not just to ask the question of, “**who else cares about this?**” from within the system, but to also continually get the community’s input. As an on-going engagement activity, **it then becomes an on-going question of “who is missing?”**, and **“how do we engage them?”**

Explore opportunities to engage internally and across the system about the value of community partnerships. Although one individual can model the humility that supports the voice and inclusion of partners in the work, imagine the potential force of a uniform and aligned system, collectively seeking the support, input and help of the community!

System staff often live in two worlds as well, and are keenly aware of the distrust their communities of origin sometimes feel towards the system, yet also feeling limited in their ability to influence the system for the betterment of community, and further that they may be inadvertently contributing to the marginalization and oppression of those same communities. The effect can be that **staff feel torn between serving the system and serving their communities**, which often contributes to worker burnout and job dissatisfaction. When our systems build better relationships with the communities they serve, staff may feel more personally connected to their work and empowered as change agents. The same gifts and talents, relationships and traditions that they exchange in their communities to promote personal, familial and community well-being, no longer need remain siloed or hidden within their professional roles.

Join with other cross system partners that either touch the families that are served by the child welfare system, or that are a part of the collective group of system partners that contribute to safety, permanency and well-being supports, services and decision-making are important in engagement efforts. It is not enough to develop better relationships with the community, to better understand their lived experiences, and to be open to their wisdom and contributions towards positive change. All parts of the child welfare system, from administrative and support staff to post-permanency case managers, Court, behavioral health and probation partners, must join the conversation with child welfare and community as well. Each brings valuable knowledge and resources to the convergence of a new path, and without their contributions, the whole suffers.

Potential Partner Examples

INTERNAL	CROSS-SYSTEM	EXTERNAL
Administrative Staff	Judges	Foster Parents
Transportation Support	Children's Attorneys	Group Home Providers
Clerical	Parents' Attorneys	Relative Caregivers
Social Work Staff	CASAs/GALs	Community Members
Case Aids	County Counsel	Tribal/Cultural Elders
Supervisors	Mediators/Interpreters	Clergy/Spiritual Leaders
Managers	Behavioral Health	Districts/Schools/Teachers
Directors	Public Health	Birth parents
Public Health Staff	Probation	Birth relatives
Drug and Alcohol Staff	Education	Familial Supports
Foster Care staff	Child Support	Foster/Former Youth
Parent Advocates	Eligibility	Training Institutions
Placement Eligibility	Employment	Colleges/Universities
Teaming Facilitators	Housing	Philanthropists
Training/Coaching Staff		Funders
Staff Development		Researchers
		Trainers
		Tribes
		Tribal Organizations
		Service Provider Orgs
		Regional Centers
		Law Enforcement
		Hospitals/Staff
		Policy Makers
		Advocates
		Technical Assistance
		State/Federal Partners

IMPORTANT ENGAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS:

- ✓ **Use** untapped organizations/individuals who have the **capacity** and **resources to support and coordinate** partner activities. If the system is struggling with capacity and resource limitations, there may be a partner organization or untapped community resource with skill, knowledge and capacity to help (e.g., *local mentoring program looking for expansion opportunity writes grant to support partnership efforts with local child welfare organization*).
- ✓ **Engage** potential partners as soon as possible in the planning stages of new collaborative work. Communities often feel slighted and further marginalized when systems pursue funding and initiate plans that will impact their communities, without being included from the beginning. Conversely, communities engaged **early on**, feel valued in the process of **co-creation** and take **ownership** in successes and set-backs.
- ✓ **Consider** potential barriers to stakeholder engagement and be willing to hear from community about what it will take to re-build trust and keep them engaged. *See Common Partnership Barrier Tip Sheet* for suggestions.
- ✓ **Recruit** reputable cultural and tribal leaders from the communities overrepresented in your system and other untapped sources of community wisdom. Expand engagement to include a broad group of elders, healers and leaders among caregivers, service providers, current birth families and others with system, community or cultural expertise who bring often overlooked perspectives to partnership efforts. Be thoughtful about how to best engage them. **Be clear** about why their input is valuable and the **various ways** they can best **support practice and system improvement efforts**.
- ✓ **Explore** and develop a full understanding of the unique government-to-government relationship between the United States and Tribes. With both perspectives on the notion of tribal sovereignty—that Tribes have inherent sovereign power that predates foreign “discovery of the Americas” and that Tribes have sovereign power that has been written into Federal law—Tribes and their leaders have the right to be treated with the respect of a nation. Sending low-level county employees to engage with elders communicates extreme disrespect and a lack of understanding of tribal sovereignty. Although the President may not be available for your local practice improvement listening sessions, high-level system leaders should initiate partnership efforts and act as the link between Tribes and the system. If you don’t know or understand, ask!

Early Engagement Activities: HOW

Consider how you want to **create a safe space** for ongoing meaningful inclusion and involvement of both internal and external stakeholders who may have some measure of reluctance due to past trauma or for whom this level of engagement is a new experience.

Develop **shared agreements** around what individuals need from themselves and others so that all perspectives and contributions are welcomed and so people feel respected and valued in the conversation.

Listen for and be responsive to historic trauma and trauma perpetuated by the system. In many of the communities served by the child welfare system there exists deep trauma, pain and grief relating to their histories of disrespect, systematic oppression, marginalization and institutional racism. It can

manifest itself in many ways; some of which the system has categorized as “resistant”, “angry” and “secretive”, amongst others. Reframed through a different lens however, this may be seen as protective coping from additional pain, trauma and grief by the government and its representatives. Potential partners who have experienced the system, even if they have successfully navigated it, may experience secondary trauma upon retelling their stories or lifting up their perspectives.

Many system representatives struggle with **acknowledging historic and system trauma**, and further with offering atonement. Yet, communities struggle to move past the realities of the trauma without such recognition which can hinder the system’s ability to effectively partner with and serve them. If the system is to truly partner, it must first **acknowledge** that community has little reason to trust the system or system representatives before attempting to begin a new kind of relationship. In the spirit of true partnership, for communities to begin to trust the system, acknowledgement of past failures, pains and grief is critical.

Modeling Humility not only helps to bring into balance the power differential that often exists between system representatives and the communities served, but it also invites essential perspectives and wisdom from the people who know best what their children and families need to heal. Practicing humility does not mean that one’s perspective is not valuable, it acknowledges that others’ perspectives are equally as valuable.

Early Engagement Activities: WHERE & WHEN

In the beginning, it is important to leverage existing forums and venues for partnership work to formulate. If there are existing meetings within the system where potential partners can be invited or community meetings or forums where system leaders can be invited, why create something new? As partnership activities develop, trust is built and relationships grow, there may be opportunity or need to re-purpose or create new venues or forums to progress.

Examples of partnership venues and forums:

- Community task force has standing agenda item for child welfare leader reporting and engagement
- Focus groups held in the community by system representatives
- Policy or practice working groups within the system include representatives from various stakeholder groups, Tribes or communities
- Convenings of shared learning opportunities always include key stakeholders in planning and as participants
- Community stakeholder group meets with system leaders on regular basis
- Conference calls, webinars and video conferences are used to engage community representatives for whom travel or timing is a challenge

In bringing potential partners together, it is necessary to **lean in to the discomfort** that can emerge when past wounds are exposed, trust is developing and new relationships are being formed. **Be willing to be uncomfortable** and to **stay in the conversation with community** knowing that growth is a by-product of discomfort.

Venue considerations

- Make sure to verbally recognize any location or historic landmark where communities have either experienced trauma or where their ancestors have experienced trauma.
- Hold meetings in system spaces that either appeal aesthetically to community or where spaces have been remodeled with community to increase appeal.
- Hold meetings in community spaces or in partner organizations that are accessible and welcoming to community.
- Give consideration when it might be best to hold a meeting in a neutral setting.
- Meeting times should prioritize availability of community over convenience for system staff. If during work hours, attention to child care, transportation, parking and other logistical considerations may be needed.
- Whenever possible, offer snacks, refreshments or food to participants. At the very least offer beverages.