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A Starter Kit on Engaging People With Lived Experience in Child Support Programs

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This starter kit is for child support programs, grant recipients, and stakeholders to engage people with lived experience to enhance child support programs and practices. Use this kit to help you:

- ✓ Identify and recruit people with lived experience.
- ✓ Equitably compensate people with lived experience.
- ✓ Effectively and respectfully engage people with lived experience.

By engaging people with lived experience to inform your programs and practices, you can:

- ✓ Increase understanding of the target population's needs.¹
- ✓ Design effective and responsive programs and policies.²
- ✓ Create buy-in and increase retention and engagement in services by improving responsiveness and effectiveness of services for people with different (cultural and other) backgrounds.³
- ✓ Improve practice, service delivery, and program effectiveness.^{4,5,6}

Lived experience is “the experiences of people on whom a social issue or combination of issues has had a direct impact.”

Lived experiences that are valuable and needed to inform child support programming may include those of parents who rely on informal support, noncustodial parents, domestic violence survivors, young parents, youth who are owed or receive support from a parent, and individuals who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated.

Source: Sandhu, B. (2017). *The value of lived experience in social change: The need for leadership and organisational development in the social sector.* <https://thelivedexperience.org/report>

¹ The Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses. (2013). *Survivor voices inclusion project: Creating meaningful survivor engagement, bringing a survivor voice to every table.* <http://www.oaith.ca/assets/files/pdfs/SVIP%20Model%20of%20Survivor%20Engagement.pdf>

² Cabrera, N., & Peters, E. H. (2000). Public policies and father involvement. *Marriage & Family Review*, 29(4), 295–314. https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v29n04_04

³ Capacity Building Center for States. (2017). *Youth engagement blueprint series: Viewing young people as organizational assets.* Children's Bureau. <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/resources/viewing-young-people-as-organizational-assets>; see also Lopez, M., Hofer, K., Bumgarner, E., & Taylor, D. (2017). *Developing culturally responsive approaches to serving diverse populations: A resource guide for community-based organizations.* National Resource Center on Hispanic Children and Families. <https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/cultural-competence-guide.pdf>

⁴ White, W. L. (1998). *Slaying the dragon: The history of addiction treatment and recovery in America.* Chestnut Health Systems/Lighthouse Institute.

⁵ Davidson, L., Chinman, M., Kloos, B., Weingarten, R., Stayner, D., & Kraemer Tebes, J. (2006). Peer support among individuals with severe mental illness: A review of the evidence. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 6(2), 165–187. <https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.6.2.165>

⁶ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2017). *Value of peers, 2017.* https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/brss_tacs/value-of-peers-2017.pdf





Identify and Recruit

An early and critical step to engaging a diverse pool of people with lived experience in the child support program is to identify and recruit them to inform your efforts. Consider the following when identifying and recruiting people with lived experience:

More Resources on Identifying and Recruiting People With Lived Experience

[Using Recruitment Strategies](#). This resource includes tips and promising practices for conducting recruitment and outreach to fathers.

[Tips for Youth Recruitment and Retention](#). This resource provides tips for youth recruitment and retention.

[Determine Whom to Engage](#). This resource includes questions and considerations to determine which stakeholders to engage, including identifying and recruiting stakeholders and monitoring group membership.

Partner with relevant community organizations. Organizations in your community such as domestic violence service providers, fatherhood programs, reentry programs, and youth engagement providers may also serve the populations you seek to recruit. Collaboration and trust with these community partners can offer ongoing opportunities to identify and recruit diverse people with lived experience to inform your programs.

Hire people with lived experience to perform outreach and recruitment activities. People with lived experience, especially those already engaged to inform and improve policy and practice, are well-positioned to perform outreach and recruitment. They can help identify and build relationships with community organizations to build referral pipelines; develop and

disseminate relevant marketing materials; foster interest and trust by conveying the benefits, purposes, and intended outcomes of engagement opportunities; and facilitate onboarding, coaching, and support to ensure engagements are successful.

Engage a social media or outreach campaign. Campaigns can cast a wide recruitment net regardless of your prior partnerships. Coordinate campaign development with representatives of the community you aim to reach so your campaign outreach messaging is targeted and relevant. Be sure campaign materials are clear about the parameters of the engagement opportunity you are advertising, whether compensation will be offered, and who to contact for more information.

To further ensure people with a diversity of experiences are informing your program:

- Explore partnerships in the community outside of human or victim service providers, such as faith-based organizations, community centers, peer support groups, or other trusted locales where community members gather.
- Seek personal referrals from people with lived experience currently engaged to expand outreach through trusted sources.
- Tailor recruitment materials to match the interests and needs of specific populations you aim to engage.





Equitable Compensation

Just as you would pay an independent consultant with the requisite professional experience for their time to advise your program, people with lived experience also deserve to be equitably valued and compensated for their time and expertise. It may come in the form of a staff person's salary, a stipend, an hourly rate, or a gift card. Consider the factors identified below when assessing what may constitute **equitable** compensation:

Assess the level of engagement. One critical factor in establishing equitable compensation is assessing the level of effort, duration, and type of work people with lived experience will perform. Consider compensating longer, more intensive work with a higher level of effort (e.g., developing and delivering a training) differently than a task that time-bound and requires lower effort (e.g., participating in a one-time interview or listening session).

Mirror compensation offered for other valued experiences. Recognize the value that people with lived experience offer your programs or practices. Lived experience is a unique type of expertise that cannot be learned in a professional or educational setting. Seek to at least mirror compensation your program offers experts with other valued experiences that may draw from one's profession, educational credentials, or type of work performed. Also consider various pay scales based on the level of engagement (as noted above) as well as the years of experience the person with lived experience may bring. If, for example, a person with lived experience and a technology consultant with similar years of experience are each invited to present for half of a 1-hour meeting, each should be compensated similarly for their time.

Offer other supports or benefits to support engagement. In addition to compensating for work conducted as part of an engagement, other resources are important to ensure that people with lived experience can actually engage. For example, provide travel reimbursements or travel advances for in-person meetings to ensure people with lived experience can engage without financial hardship or stress. Consider all travel-related costs that may be difficult for people with lived experience to cover without an advance, such as gas, parking, meals, lodging, or local transportation. If possible, also offer child or family caregiving supports or stipends as well as flexibility in the way pay is offered (e.g., by check, direct deposit, or even a cash app). Without these flexibilities in payment, people with lived experience may not be able to access the compensation offered.

Setting up the internal systems and infrastructure to pay people with lived experience may also take time and some ingenuity. Set up systems early to avoid administrative barriers or delays in payment. To get started, consider taking the steps noted below:

- **Set up a meeting with your procurement, finance, and human resource divisions.** Discuss potential administrative, technological, or policy challenges to compensating people with lived experience and explore the mechanisms through which compensation may be most feasible. For example, consider whether you will provide payment through an independent professional service contract or a contract with a community organization that would directly pay people with lived experience.
- **Conduct a pilot or demonstration effort.** Test on a small-scale the most promising administrative mechanisms to arrange compensation as well as the level of technical assistance or other supports that may be appropriate or necessary to ensure engagement is respectful and effective (see also page 5).





- **Partner with private foundations or businesses.** These entities may have more flexibility and capacity to arrange timely pay for people with lived experience as well as provide other benefits and supports.

How Michigan and Texas Have Compensated People With Lived Experience to Inform Their Child Support Programs

Michigan: The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) Office of Child Support (OCS) has had a Community Advisory Council (Council) since early 2021. The Council includes 12 parents who advise OCS on a range of program and policy topics focused on helping child support participants better navigate the Michigan child support program. For every meeting, Council members are provided a gift card for their time. To arrange payment, OCS coordinated with its internal financial management unit to ensure it had adequate funding and the finance section of MDHHS' Grants Division to use its procurement card to purchase the gift card claim codes.

Texas: Through its Family Violence Educational and Outreach Initiative, the Child Support Division of the Texas Office of the Attorney General (CSD) has engaged parents as interviewees, policy workgroup participants, and consultants. Parents have advised on a range of child support topics, including domestic and family violence, support services, court processes, and child support orders. Stipends and travel reimbursement have been provided to parents for these engagements. To support the initiative and to set up the necessary payment mechanisms required a coordinated effort across CSD, which included its contracts (draft/execute stipend agreements), legal (review agreements), budget (track spending), communication (review outreach to parents), and program innovation (project management) offices. CSD also needed to confirm that stipend payments were allowable under applicable state law. CSD then engaged an external partner, the Texas Council on Family Violence, and provided it a specific budget line item to support parent engagement efforts.





Effective Engagement

Reflections From a Lived Experience Expert: Some “Dos and Don’ts” for Effective Engagement

Engaging people with lived experience can be as simple as talking with or gathering feedback from former child support paying or receiving parents or as complex as working with agency partners to create a peer mentoring program. Some important “Dos and Don’ts” include:

DO:

- ✓ “Lean in” to uncomfortable conversations. Kindly show you want to understand and learn what customers find frustrating, hurtful, or confusing.
- ✓ Listen to customers’ past challenges to inform future changes.
- ✓ Stay focused on building trust. This is as, if not more, important than accountability.
- ✓ Ask who else with lived experience should be at the table.

DON’T:

- ✓ Ask customers in crisis to advise on program, practice, or policy changes. Long-term planning is difficult when short-term needs go unmet.
- ✓ Assume customers are incapable of professionalism. Becoming a change partner is a process.
- ✓ Be afraid to engage with customers with past negative experiences. Lived experience is about overcoming.

You may be meeting one-on-one with an individual with lived experience or with a group. It may be as a part of a listening session or a focus group. It may be to inform or deliver a training. In any instance, it is important that the engagement be respectful, transparent, and mutually beneficial. Consider the tips below for before, during, and after your engagement. See also **appendix A** for additional tips specific to various engagement roles.

BEFORE:

Identify the best engagement approach to align with your intended outcomes. For example, if you want to gather ongoing feedback on new services or practices, a longer-term consultation or standing advisory committee may be better than a one-time listening session or focus group.

Arrange for compensation or other benefits in advance, such as transportation or childcare support to ensure equitable engagement (see also page 3). Be clear about the available compensation up front when you ask people with lived experience to engage with your program.

Be upfront about the goals of the engagement as well as the roles and responsibilities that people with lived experience should expect and how the information gathered will be used and attributed. Do not overpromise and be clear about what is and is not possible.

Share draft meeting agendas or materials to solicit feedback from people with lived experience before the engagement begins to promote collaboration and give people with lived experience a sense of agency and control to level power imbalances.

DURING:

Offer support during the engagement to build rapport and ensure people with lived experience feel comfortable and able to authentically share feedback or recommendations. For example, do something to “break the ice” before the engagement begins, offer multiple opportunities to pause and ask questions, and provide participants a point of contact to message directly if they need more support.

Do not push people with lived experience to recount their personal stories unnecessarily and without consent. Some may feel they have to share these experiences and that is why they are engaged, but people with lived experience can meaningfully contribute without sharing their personal stories.





Reiterate the purposes and goals of the engagement as well as expectations, intended outcomes, limitations of the engagement, and how information will be used and by whom. Be clear whether people with lived experience will receive any follow-up communication about the engagement (and how often) and if they will be able to review the content to which they contributed before it is finalized.

Provide positive and constructive feedback to people with lived experience to enhance their ongoing professional development.

AFTER:

Offer a chance to debrief to assess how your program can improve engagement processes and the effects of the engagement—its barriers and successes.

Ensure payment is processed. Leaving people with lived experience to chase down payment or struggle to get answers about payment processes can have an impact on their future engagement and how others might engage with you in the future.

Close the feedback loop by sharing next steps of the project and offering chances to review outputs before they are finalized. Doing so will ensure you have accurately reflected feedback and will help build trust for future engagement.





Appendix A: Additional Tips and Resources to Engage People With Lived Experience

Specific Tips and Considerations	Additional Resources
Advisory Committee or Council⁷	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with people with lived experience to define the purpose, goals, scope, term, number and type of members, strategic plan, and structure of an advisory committee or council. Provide opportunities for professional development through training, peer support, learning exchanges, networking, and leadership opportunities. Create a reliable, consistent, and inclusive space for meetings, including a plan to address barriers to participation. 	<p>A Guide to Forming Advisory Boards for Family-Serving Organizations. This resource highlights the series of decisions and steps needed to form an effective advisory board.</p> <p>A Toolkit for Creating a Diverse and Inclusive Youth Advisory Council. This toolkit includes exercises and experiential activities to support the creation of diverse and inclusive Youth Advisory Councils.</p>
Focus Group or Listening Session⁸	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-develop questions for a focus group or listening session with people with lived experience to ensure they are trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, healing and person-centered, and strengths-based. Involve people with lived experience in the planning, execution, interpretation, and analysis of focus group or listening session results. 	<p>Listen Up! Youth Listening Session Toolkit. This toolkit is designed for organizations that want to conduct a youth listening session and includes ready to use templates for planning and conducting a youth listening session.</p> <p>Focus Group Tip Sheet. This tip sheet provides a step-by-step guide on how to effectively plan, conduct, use, and analyze focus group data.</p>
Consultation⁹	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide different methods for individuals to provide consultation depending on the intended outcomes, including written consultation, individual and group consultation, interviews, email surveys, and virtual whiteboards. Be transparent about the limitations and scope of the consultation, including challenges in executing recommendations or integrating feedback. 	<p>Consumer Engagement: Strategies for Engaging Families. This resource offers strategies for engaging parents as consumers in plans, processes, and programs that are part of an agency's everyday responsibilities, including enhancing websites and social media posts, holding data walks, and parent cafés.</p> <p>SAMHSA's Youth Engagement Guidance: Strategies, Tools, and Tips for Supporting and Meaningful Youth Engagement in Federal Government-Sponsored Meetings and Events. This guide provides federal staff and contractors strategies, tools, and tips for appropriately engaging youth in government-sponsored events and meetings, including printable sample documents, resources, an easy-to-use checklist, and a step-by-step approach to modeling effective youth engagement.</p>

⁷ Engaging people with lived experience to advise and provide proposed solutions and recommendations.

⁸ Engaging people with lived experience in a group setting aimed at collecting information and/or data.

⁹ Engaging individuals or groups of people with lived experience to inform or provide feedback on policy, practice, and/or research.





Specific Tips and Considerations	Additional Resources
Parent/Peer Partners¹⁰	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Ensure parent and peer partners are provided with ongoing training, support, and coaching.▪ Involve parent and peer partners in continuous quality improvement efforts, including quality assurance and program evaluation.	<p>Parent Partner Program Manual. This resource provides a template and guidance for program administrators, parent partner coordinators, family leaders, and other stakeholders to develop their own parent partner program manual.</p> <p>The Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum. Developed for peer support groups, this curriculum is designed to enhance the parenting skills of noncustodial fathers.</p>

¹⁰ Engaging people with lived experience to provide peer support for navigating systems, overcoming challenges, and enhancing skills and/or engagement.

