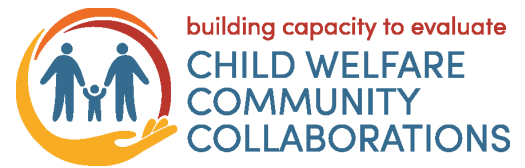


Supporting Equity through Child Welfare Community Collaborations



This brief describes efforts to support equity in projects funded by the *Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families* initiative (referred to here as Child Welfare Community Collaborations, or CWCC; see **Box 1** for a more detailed description of the initiative and the accompanying cross-site evaluation). This brief uses data collected for the cross-site evaluation and from grantee documents to answer the following research question: “What are the strategies being used to identify and address equity needs in communities seeking to prevent child maltreatment?”

Key findings:

- CWCC projects used **several key strategies to promote equity¹** including:
 - **Engaging community members and individuals with lived experience** (particularly those with child welfare experience) in program design and implementation to help ensure services meet the needs of the community.
 - **Promoting more equitable access to services** by offering services in a variety of formats (both in-person and virtually) that are convenient and accessible to families, reducing language barriers by translating resources into multiple languages, and coordinating services across systems to reduce the agency-level silos that can make systems difficult for families to navigate.

Box 1. About CWCC and the Cross-site Process Evaluation

The CWCC initiative is designed to mobilize communities to **develop and evaluate multi-system collaboratives that address local barriers and provide a continuum of services to prevent child abuse and neglect**. The initiative is funded by the Children’s Bureau (CB) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families (ACF). In 2018 and 2019, CB awarded 5-year cooperative agreements to a total of 13 states, non-profit organizations, and Native American tribal organizations (referred to here as “grantees”).

To advance the evidence around collaborative approaches to preventing child abuse and neglect, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within ACF, in collaboration with CB, contracted with Abt Associates and its partner Child Trends to conduct the *Building Capacity to Evaluate Child Welfare Community Collaborations* project. The project includes:

- **evaluation-related technical assistance (TA)** to support grantees and local evaluators and their capacity to conduct their required project-specific evaluations and
- **a cross-site process evaluation** of the CWCC grants to better understand how communities came together to develop and implement their CWCC approaches.

This brief is one of a [series of products](#) developed through the CWCC cross-site process evaluation. The evaluation explores five key research questions focused on partnership approaches and challenges, data use, implementation activities, contextual factors promoting and impeding implementation, and sustainability.

¹ Key strategies are ordered based on the frequency that they were used by CWCC projects (from most to least common).

- **Embedding equity as a guiding principle** in the work by, for example, dedicating organizational time and resources to providing diversity, equity, and inclusion training to staff.
- **Working to rebuild trust with community members** and individuals who have historically been overrepresented in and disenfranchised by the child welfare system.
- **Using data** to identify community needs and geographic areas with scarce resources, better understand the impacts of systemic racism, and identify what strategies might fit the needs of their communities.
- Grantees and their partners identified the following as **areas where growth is needed** to achieve more equitable systems and outcomes:
 - **More specialized services** for specific groups in their communities (e.g., LGBTQIA2S+ individuals,² American Indian/Alaska Natives, immigrants, etc.) to address unmet needs;
 - **Greater authentic engagement with individuals with lived experience**, building upon initial engagement efforts by continuously involving individuals with lived experience throughout each phase of the project and valuing them as equal partners (e.g., compensating them for their time);
 - **Continuous self-education about and commitment to equity** (on the part of both individuals and organizations and both grantees and partners); and
 - **Strategies to overcome bureaucratic and legislative barriers.**

² The term LGBTQIA2S+ refers to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, asexual, Two-Spirit, or other gender or sexual identity.

Overview

There is an abundance of evidence that families of color are overrepresented in and disparately impacted by the child welfare system.³ For example, the percentage of children in foster care who are Black or American Indian/Alaska Native is greater than the national percentage of children who are members of these racial and/or ethnic groups.⁴ Systemic and institutional racism have historically disadvantaged families of color who experience higher rates of poverty, oversurveillance, and bias (explicit or implicit).⁵ Racial disparities occur at multiple decision points of the child welfare system—including disproportionate reporting of child maltreatment, higher numbers of investigations and critical assessments for parents of color, and more severe punitive decisions compared to White families.⁶

The Children's Bureau (CB) publicly acknowledges these disparities in child welfare and has committed to addressing them and promoting equity (see **Box 2** for the definition of equity we use throughout this brief).⁷ In accordance with the Executive Orders focused on promoting equity in the federal government,⁸ CB developed a comprehensive equity strategy and specifically **identified "preventing children from coming into foster care" as a top priority for increasing equity.**

Box 2. Equity Defined

"The consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment."

Executive Order no. 13985, "Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government," January 2021

The CWCC initiative was a key part of CB's prevention efforts and its Funding Opportunity Announcements (FOAs) in 2018 and 2019 included requirements designed to advance equity. **As such, all CWCC grantees' project designs incorporated**

³ Dettlaff, A.J. & Boyd, R. (2021). Racial Disproportionality and Disparities in the Child Welfare System: Why do they exist, and what can be done to address them? *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 692(1), 253-274.

⁴ Data on the number of children and youth of color from the [Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System \(AFCARS\)](#). Data on the number of children and youth in the United States child population come from the Annie E. Casey Foundation [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#).

⁵ Explicit bias refers to conscious bias and includes unconcealed acts of discrimination, racism, and prejudice. Implicit bias refers to unconscious, unintentional prejudice that may guide one's behavior and decision making. For additional information on bias in the child welfare system and strategies to reduce it, see the Children's Bureau's resources on [Strategies for Reducing Bias: Addressing Disproportionality](#)

⁶ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). Child welfare practice to address racial disproportionality and disparity. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/child-welfare-practice-address-racial-disproportionality-and-disparity/>. Dettlaff, A. J., & Boyd, R. (2020). Racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system: Why do they exist, and what can be done to address them? *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 692(1), 253-274.

⁷ To learn more about the Children's Bureau's commitment to addressing disproportionality, disparity, and equity through child welfare see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/focus-areas/equity>.

⁸ For more information on ongoing efforts to advance equity in the federal government please see the January 2021 Executive Order on "[Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#)" and the February 2023 executive order on "[Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#)."

principles of equity in some way.

Specifically, grantees were required to develop plans for how their project would engage parents and youth (especially those with lived experience, see **Box 3**).⁹ These efforts are critical because authentic engagement of families and youth at each stage of a project promotes accountability and transparency and helps to ensure programming is relevant and appropriate given community needs.¹⁰

In May 2021, CB further supported grantees' use of strategies to promote equity by **inviting each grantee to apply for up to \$102,864 in supplemental funding** to support additional project activities designed to “address racial disparity and promote racial equity and inclusion in the child welfare and family systems, especially in underserved communities.”¹¹ Eleven of the CWCC grantees applied for and received the supplemental funding; two grantees did not pursue the supplemental funding but did engage in other activities designed to promote equity.

Box 3. Defining Community Members and Individuals with Lived Experience

In interviews with grantees and their partners, the evaluation team realized that key terms such as community members and individuals with lived experience often held different meanings to different individuals and in different contexts. To be more equitable and transparent in our terminology, throughout this brief we use the following terms to align with the language most commonly used by interviewees:

- **Community members:** Individuals living in or having ties to a geographic area where a CWCC project was focused.
- **Individuals with lived experience:** Individuals with varied and intersecting personal life experiences that could be relevant to CWCC projects. Interviewees did not always clarify what type of lived experience these individuals brought, although some specified that this included individuals who:
 - Had been impacted by the child welfare system,
 - Shared demographic characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, parental status, socioeconomic status) with the project's focal population(s) or populations disproportionately represented in the child welfare system,
 - Had participated in family programs or services or navigated public benefits systems, and/or
 - Had lived in the community in which the CWCC project was focused.

In this brief, we use both terms but acknowledge that they are not mutually exclusive (e.g., individuals with lived experience can be community members but might not always be) and can veil the nuance of many different experiences and identities. As such, **a lesson learned is that to promote equity, it's important to clarify language when referring to groups of individuals, instead of using broader terms that might mask important distinctions.** Wherever possible, the evaluation team has identified the type of lived experience or community member being referred to.

⁹ Cohort 1 grantees were encouraged to “provide a convincing plan for involving partners and nontraditional partners (including parents, youth, and other consumers of services)” (p.43), for the full FOA see https://cwlibrary.childwelfare.gov/discovery/delivery/01CWIG_INST:01CWIG/1218617180007651. Cohort 2 grantees were explicitly required to “develop strategic collaborations with... parents and youth with lived experience” (p.3) and to “consult with youth and parents with lived experience in the child welfare system in the design and implementation of the community-based service delivery system” (p.25). For the full Cohort 2 FOA, see https://cwlibrary.childwelfare.gov/discovery/delivery/01CWIG_INST:01CWIG/1218615120007651.

¹⁰ In this brief we use The Child Welfare Capacity Building Center for States' definition of authentic engagement as “active, ongoing collaboration of youth, families, and other stakeholders... in a way that recognizes them as equal partners in achieving practice and systems change.” See Capacity Building Center for States (2019). Strategies for Authentic Integration of Family and Youth Voice in Child Welfare. Available at: <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/resources/strategies-for-authentic-integration-of-family-and-youth-voice-in-child-welfare/>

¹¹ Children's Bureau, *Re: CWCC Grantees Racial Equity Supplement Offer*, 11 May 2021.

Using data from semi-structured interviews during site visits and from grantee documents (see **Box 4** for a more detailed discussion of data sources), this brief describes: (1) the array of strategies used to improve equity in service provision, (2) areas where continued improvement and growth is needed to achieve more equitable systems and outcomes, and (3) implications from these findings.

Box 4. Data Used for this Brief

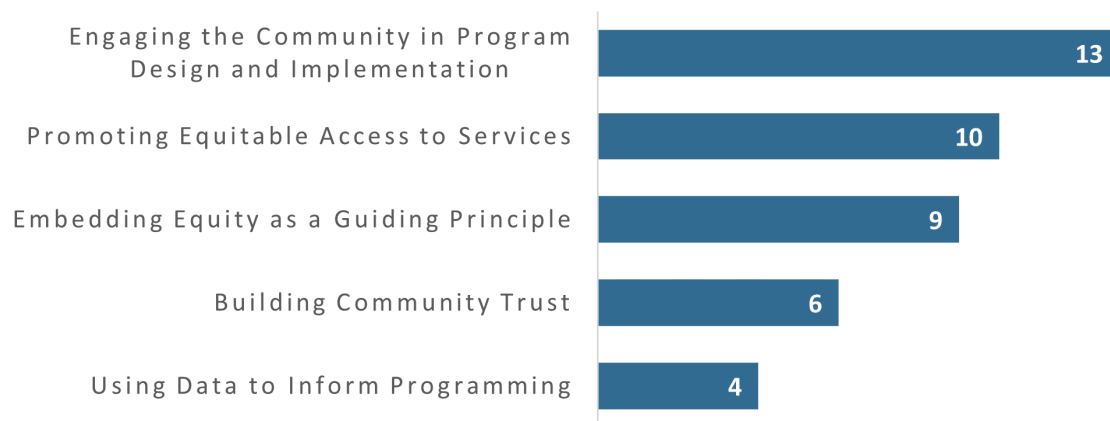
- **Site visits with grantees and partners.** The evaluation team conducted annual site visits that included semi-structured interviews with representatives from all 13 CWCC projects. Interviewees included leaders and staff from the grantee organization and partner organizations. Interviews focused on approaches to partnership, project aims and priorities, strategies for using data, implementation strategies, diversity and equity, and lessons learned. This brief uses interviews from the first three waves of data collection for cohort 1 (2020, 2021, and 2022) and the first two waves for cohort 2 (2021 and 2022).
- **Grantee documents.** The evaluation team reviewed the original grant applications for all 13 CWCC grantees. The evaluation team also reviewed the supplemental equity funding applications for the 11 grantees who applied for this funding.

For more detailed information on the data used in this brief please see the [CWCC Design and Methods Brief](#).

What Strategies Did Projects Use to Promote Equity?

The evaluation team grouped the strategies CWCC projects used to promote equity into five categories, see **Exhibit 1** below.¹²

Exhibit 1. CWCC Projects Use of Strategies to Promote Equity



¹² To identify equity-promoting strategies, the evaluation team used qualitative analysis software to code transcripts from semi-structured interviews with grantees and partners (see Box 4) and group the content by emerging themes. Subsequently, the evaluation team reviewed relevant grantee documents (see Box 4) and added to the initial counts when a grantee used an equity strategy that fell into one of the five themes but was not yet reflected. For more detailed information on the data and methods used in this brief please see the [CWCC Design and Methods Brief](#).

Engaging the Community in Program Design and Implementation

As described in this brief's overview, engagement of community members and individuals with lived experience in each stage of a project's work can promote equity by ensuring that community needs and priorities are reflected in the project's goals and activities. **All 13 projects engaged community members and people with lived experience** in the design and/or implementation of their projects in some way (see **Box 3** above). For example, these individuals often provided feedback on the projects' goals and activities, identifying opportunities for continuous improvement based on their knowledge of unaddressed or emerging community needs.

Soliciting Input from Community Members, Individuals with Lived Experience, or Program Participants

All 13 CWCC projects worked to solicit input from community members, individuals with lived experience, or program participants that could be used to improve program planning or activities. Common formats for community engagement included (but were not limited to):

- **Advisory councils** comprised of individuals with lived experience, community members, and leaders of community-based organizations who had a strong understanding of the needs present in their community. For example, one project developed a youth advisory council (comprised of youth with and without lived experience in the child welfare system) that helped identify needs in the community.
- **Community Cafés and listening sessions** where parents and caregivers with lived experience and other members of the community come together to discuss local needs and concerns. For example, one project described how community cafés helped them to identify the most pressing issues and needs in their area, such as the need for a more coordinated service system to support families. Another project described how they held listening sessions with community members and individuals with lived experience to inform their planning and continuous quality improvement efforts.

“So, individuals with lived experience [...] really are viewed as a partner and really have opportunities to shape conversations and [...] decisions. [...] So, the intentional opportunities are there, [which prompts] important conversations: [...] how do we need to change our business, our conversations, our perspectives? So that when we do have opportunities for individuals with lived experience, they feel ... like they are sharing power with those at the table. And are we willing to share power? Really having those open conversations amongst ourselves.”

—Grantee Interviewee

- **Discussions with family navigators or other peer mentors** who interact directly with program participants and can relay common challenges to the grantee.¹³ For example, one interviewee explained that they ask navigators to help them identify the most common challenges and service gaps faced by families and then use that information to make changes to services.

Using Community Input to Align Programming with Local Cultures and Norms

Four projects specifically used community input to ensure that local cultures and norms informed their programming. For example, one project drew on input from community members, individuals with lived experience, and tribal organizations to create an approach of measuring outcomes that accounted for and was congruent with the norms and cultures of tribes in its service area. The interviewee from this project emphasized the importance of cultural humility and continuous learning in their work to best serve families. An interviewee from another project described the importance of providing funding directly to communities to allow them to decide how to fund efforts to address their own needs, such as substance use treatment and childcare.

Employing Direct Service Staff with Lived Experience

Nine projects employed individuals with lived experience with the child welfare system on their projects, which helped embed their knowledge, expertise, and guidance and better prepare the project to support participants. For example, interviewees from four projects said that lived expertise was prioritized when hiring family coaches or family resource center staff. One interviewee described revising their job descriptions and hiring practices to purposefully recruit staff with lived experience in the child welfare system, and another interviewee described how they hired two program “graduates” as parent representatives to assist with recruitment. This same interviewee also described how the family coaches and resource staff with lived child welfare experience not only provided direct services to participants, but also gave substantial input into planning activities and decision-making, drawing from their own experiences and feedback from participants.

Promoting Equitable Access to Services

There are often barriers to accessing services that disproportionately affect historically disenfranchised groups.¹⁴ For example, place-based barriers such as a lack of available supports or a lack of public transportation may prevent individuals in certain communities from physically accessing services. Other services might be inaccessible to individuals without digital access, low literacy levels, and/or language barriers. At the systems level, a lack of coordination between agencies can make systems difficult for parents and caregivers to navigate. Several CWCC projects took steps to overcome these barriers to promote equity and improve outcomes for the families they serve.

¹³ Family navigators are individuals that provide participant-driven, individualized support to families. Family navigation usually includes referrals to outside services and provision of concrete supports to meet both immediate and long-term needs. For more information on family navigation services and examples of which projects used this approach, please see the [CWCC Overview Brief](#).

¹⁴ Building Changes. (2012). Silos to Systems: Solutions for Vulnerable Families summary report. Available at: <https://buildingchanges.org/resources/silos-to-systems-solutions-for-vulnerable-families-summary-report/>

Ten projects implemented strategies designed to remove barriers to service access. Specifically, interviewees described adapting programming to better meet families' needs, reducing language barriers, and improving cross-system coordination.

Adapting Programs to Meet Families' Needs

Four projects adapted their program (i.e., changing program delivery or activities) to meet families' needs, rather than implementing a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, interviewees from two projects said they adapted the delivery format of their programming to accommodate the specific needs of families in their local community. One of these interviewees noted that families in their community often lacked access to reliable transportation and had scheduling conflicts that made it difficult for families to attend services in person, so the project began offering programming and services virtually to improve access. Conversely, the other interviewee explained that many families in their community did not have internet access, so they pivoted back to in-person programming to make programming more accessible for their community.

Interviewees from two other projects described adapting their program to include the provision of concrete supports (e.g., food or housing assistance) to help families meet basic needs and have the economic stability to access other services as needed. For example, partners worked with families to identify material needs (usually during screening/intake), and provided support for things such as food, housing, childcare, diapers, cribs, and clothing.

Reducing Language Barriers

Five projects attempted to reduce language barriers to meet the needs of diverse communities by translating both programming and printed resources (e.g., pamphlets, flyers) into multiple languages. For example, one interviewee described **the importance of working with native speakers to help ensure translations were culturally appropriate, as some words or phrases can lose or change meaning when directly translated.** However, one interviewee also cautioned that it can be misleading to translate materials into languages that service provider staff cannot speak, because this might lead families to assume the organization can provide services in their primary language when they cannot. This example demonstrates the importance of having awareness of the cultures, languages, and dialects in the community, as well as continuously assessing organizational capacity to meet community needs and creatively fill gaps.

Increasing Cross-system Coordination

Interviewees from five projects explained that agency-level silos can make systems difficult for families to navigate, especially families in need of multiple kinds of support (e.g., housing assistance and food security). They described the need to form strategies to reduce system fragmentation, simplify system navigation, and improve access to needed services. For example, one project worked to reduce system fragmentation by streamlining and reinforcing connections to other systems in their referral base, which helped to increase families' access to services.

Embedding Equity as a Guiding Principle

As equity has emerged as a priority nationwide, conversations within child welfare and other systems have centered around ways to correct historical injustices and embed equity within policies and programs moving forward. **Nine projects explicitly used strategies to center and prioritize equity in their projects.** Specifically, they:

- **Dedicated organizational time and resources to equity-focused professional development and educational opportunities.** For example, some projects contracted with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) consultants to provide trainings to direct service staff on the root causes of inequity and provide guidance to project evaluators around best practices for collecting qualitative data from program participants. Interviewees described using DEI trainings to support understanding of and commitment to equity across their projects. Examples include training community partners on equity and the value of utilizing families' perspectives, train-the-trainer activities to support continuous learning, and conducting equity training for all collaborative members collectively rather than training staff from grantee and partner organizations separately.
- **Identified equity-focused objectives or goals for each collaborative meeting.** One interviewee described implementing this approach over the course of the project in response to feedback from project staff. They shared that it was difficult to measure progress toward the collaborative's equity goals and to "narrow things down into manageable action items [and] next steps." By setting aside time during meetings to focus on equity planning and goals as they related to the broader project, the interviewee said they were able to "guide [the collaborative] in the direction of what outcomes the project is trying to accomplish," and ensure equity is "infused in everything [they] do."

“[W]hen we think about the conversations around racial justice and equity this last year, I think that, in a good way, it has brought to the table that we cannot have any meetings or work around child abuse prevention, and around consultation, and around any of this without talking about how race and racism is a component.”

—Grantee Interviewee

Building Community Trust

Many interviewees described strain in the trust between agencies and families, especially among families of color and families living in poverty who are overrepresented in the child welfare system. To address this, **six projects implemented strategies designed to increase equity by building—or rebuilding—trust.** Interviewees emphasized how deconstructing systemic racism in the child welfare system relies on acknowledging the impact that racism has had on families of color (specifically Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children), engaging in uncomfortable but necessary conversations with these families, and patiently working toward rebuilding trust.

While trust building is a critical first step to promoting equitable access to services, it takes time. In many communities, programs must work to overcome the effects of decades of unjust treatment of people of color. For example, one interviewee said in their community, which is “mainly Black [and] Brown individuals,” there was a perception of “the same old [White] people making the decisions” and this bred distrust of the system. Another interviewee explained that persistence and patience were key to gaining families’ trust. Projects undertook the following activities to build relationships and trust within their communities:

- One project encouraged collaborative members to recognize the need to **commit to anti-racism** to rebuild the trust necessary for collaboration. Specifically, an interviewee from that project described how their organization worked to build trust and commit to anti-racism by consistently using language that identified and named “white supremacist culture.” This interviewee went on to explain that the use of this language created “a different culture of acceptance and less microaggressions” and made them feel that their lived experience was acknowledged.
- Two projects used **community or parent cafés to help facilitate trust-building**. One interviewee said that the parent-led cafés brought together peers with shared experiences in a judgement-free space where navigator staff provided resources and support. Similarly, an interviewee from another project described how parent café facilitators fostered trust through compassionate, nonjudgmental interactions with families and provided a “safe space” for parents and partners to voice their opinions and concerns.
- Two projects aimed to build trust by **partnering with trusted organizations within historically marginalized communities**. For example, one project serves tribal families who were initially distrustful of the CWCC project because of harm inflicted on Indigenous children and families by the child welfare system. To help reduce this distrust, the project partnered with well-known and trusted organizations in the tribal community to identify and recruit families to guide the goals of the project. The project also worked with these organizations to ensure the engagement was purposeful and not “extractive,” (e.g., being transparent about how the project used families’ feedback, fairly compensating families’ for their input). The interviewee acknowledged that more work still needed to be done to build trust, but that collaboratively planning, hosting, and facilitating events with trusted community partners helped initiate restorative conversations between the local child welfare agency and tribal entities.

*“[Child Protective Services] has been around for a long time and there is an inherent distrust especially in those marginalized communities that are top on our list for helping and supporting. So a big part of **my work has been trying to repair and heal some of those relationships** or build ... at least a personal relationship where I can figure out: how are ways that we can rebuild trust? How can we demonstrate the commitment and not just say it? ...especially with our BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] communities.”*

—Grantee Interviewee

Using Data to Inform Programming

As one interviewee noted, historically, “child welfare data has not always been used in the best ways.” For example, the use of administrative data in predictive risk models has sometimes introduced or perpetuated racial inequities.¹⁵ Despite this problematic history, data also has the potential to improve child welfare programs and policies.¹⁶ Within the context of CWCC, **four projects used data to try to increase equity** in their program planning and help them better understand their communities and more accurately identify families in need of support. Specifically:

- One project collected and analyzed data to conduct a **root cause analysis** (see **Box 5**) designed to understand the challenges families in the child welfare system faced, the origins of those challenges, and the systems which failed to address them. The project compiled research on community-based prevention efforts, state-wide data on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and feedback from community meetings to better understand the contextual factors impacting families in their service areas. The analysis found that social, economic, and racial inequities were present in the areas served and created barriers for families, influencing rates of child maltreatment. The project then used these findings to inform their implementation planning and to help ensure available services would match families’ needs.
- Three projects used **heat mapping** (see **Box 5**) to identify levels of community need and areas of resource scarcity. One project used this information during the project planning stage to select the locations of service center sites within their county and help them decide where to devote resources. Another project compared old redlining maps¹⁷ with maps displaying present-day child abuse and neglect referrals to increase

Box 5. Two Methods for Using Data to Identify Inequities

Root Cause Analyses

- **Goal:** Better understand the underlying cause of a complex problem and develop effective and appropriate solutions.
- **Common data sources:** Interviews with people who have been impacted by the problem, administrative data, historical records, and academic research.
- **Example:** A service provider wants to identify the root cause of inequities in service delivery. They conduct interviews with individuals who have experienced barriers to services, hold discussions with partners to understand why these barriers exist and what can be done, and combine this information to determine a solution.
- **To learn more:** See [CB's Guide to Problem Exploration](#).

Heat Mapping

- **Goal:** Use color to visualize the magnitude of observed data (often in a geographic area).
- **Common data sources:** Child maltreatment data from state or local agencies, service provision data, and demographic data (e.g., Census data).
- **Example:** A local government uses a heat map to visualize the reports of maltreatment in each zip code within their jurisdiction and determine where to direct prevention resources.
- **To learn more:** See this [introduction to heat mapping](#).

¹⁵ For additional information, see U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (2022). [Avoiding Racial Bias in Child Welfare Agencies’ Use of Predictive Risk Modeling](#).

¹⁶ English, D.J., Brandford, C.C., & Coghlan, L. (2020). Data-based organizational change: The use of administrative data to improve child welfare programs and policy. *Child Welfare*, 79(5), 499-515.

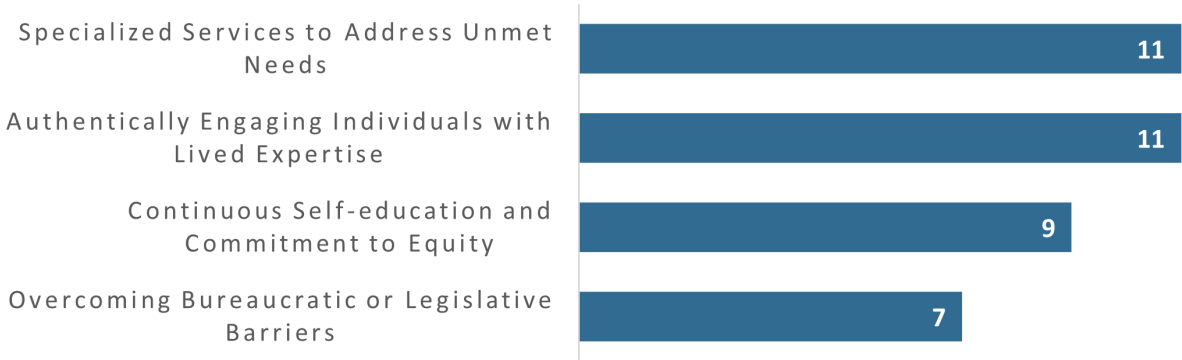
¹⁷ Redlining refers to the now illegal practice of denying people living in certain geographic areas or neighborhoods from accessing loans and other financial services based on race, color, national origin, or other discriminatory reasons. See https://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/documents/cfpb_building_block_activities_understanding-redlining_handout.pdf

community members’ awareness of historical racism and inequity. The interviewee shared that some individuals residing in the service area were skeptical of the impacts systemically racist policies had on families of color and noted that seeing the data "was a really powerful shift [. . .] and had helped people to see where racism may have existed as a systemic issue in their community."

What are the Areas for Growth?

While interviewees described considerable growth related to increasing equity and inclusion in their CWCC projects, they also described ongoing needs or challenges. The evaluation team grouped these areas for growth under four categories (see Exhibit 2 below).¹⁸

Exhibit 2. CWCC Projects Reporting each Area for Growth



Specialized Services to Address Unmet Needs

Just as our collective understanding of equity continues to evolve, needs and challenges experienced at the community level – especially among underserved populations – may shift or emerge. Interviewees from **eleven projects reported a lack of specialized services for some populations in their communities** (e.g., tribal members, immigrants, migrant workers, LGBTQIA2S+-identifying individuals, individuals in need of legal supports, individuals in need of mental health services, etc.) that they were struggling to address due to limited resources and organizational capacity. For example, one interviewee shared that while their project had been successful in partnering with organizations that work with tribes, there was still a need for

“The other area that we find interesting is how many people need legal services. And part of it is because of the immigration situation here. [P]eople have sought us out to ask about immigration questions, legal questions on that, and we refer them. What we have found is those individuals don’t necessarily want to give information to us to complete a form. They feel like it’s going to somehow get them in trouble.”

—Partner Interviewee

¹⁸ To identify the areas of growth, the evaluation team used qualitative analysis software to code transcripts from semi-structured interviews with grantees and partners (see Box 4) and group the content by emerging themes. For more detailed information on the data and methods used in this brief please see the [CWCC Design and Methods Brief](#).

additional services that were culturally responsive and tailored to the needs of tribal members (e.g., tribal-specific home visiting programs for new and expectant parents, respite care services, and childcare programs). The interviewee also explained that their project spanned a geographically large service area and it was difficult in terms of both time and resources for project staff to travel long distances. Interviewees from four other projects said more work needs to be done to identify and meet the needs of the diverse cultural communities in their jurisdictions (e.g., migrant workers, South Korean community, Guatemalan refugees). For example, interviewees described the need to overcome language barriers and explained that unfamiliarity with cultures or customs could inhibit trust and connection.

Authentically Engaging Individuals with Lived Experience

Authentic engagement of individuals with lived experience requires **“active, ongoing collaboration... in a way that recognizes them as equal partners in effecting practice and system change”** and is critical to ensuring their voices are heard and represented.¹⁹ While all CWCC projects engaged community members and individuals with lived experience to some extent, interviewees from **11 projects expressed the need for greater, authentic engagement of individuals with lived experience.**

“[W]e also know that the decision makers at the table should be families who have lived experience and that’s also been a struggle. We don’t have any of [them] around the table with the steering committee, and that’s ... what our intent has been all along, but it just hasn’t happened.”

—Grantee Interviewee

Interviewees described how authentic engagement is not just reaching out to individuals with lived experience, but continuously listening to and being ready to make changes based on what individuals with lived experience recommend. For example, one interviewee noted that **continuous partnership with families throughout all project phases (e.g., planning, implementation, continuous quality improvement)** was necessary for diverse perspectives to meaningfully influence project strategies. They specifically described the importance of not only reaching out to individuals with lived experience during the planning phase, but also continuing to solicit and act upon their feedback over the course of implementation, and being willing to use their feedback as a source of quality improvement.

Interviewees also emphasized the importance of seeing individuals with lived experience as equal partners in their work. For example, interviewees said that **more money should be devoted to fairly compensating individuals with lived experience for their contributions to the projects’ work.** As one interviewee shared, “They need to have some sort of stipend. That’s time that they’re taking out of their day [and] with their family to be able to advocate for us to continue to do what we do.”

¹⁹ See Capacity Building Center for States (2019). Strategies for Authentic Integration of Family and Youth Voice in Child Welfare. Available at: <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/resources/strategies-for-authentic-integration-of-family-and-youth-voice-in-child-welfare/>

Continuous Self-Education and Commitment to Equity

Understanding and deconstructing racism in the child welfare system is a point of continuous learning and recommitment. Interviewees from **nine projects expressed a need for continued self-education about and recommitment to equity**. Some of these projects were already providing DEI education opportunities for their staff members and/or community partners and saw opportunities to increase these activities, whereas others had not yet offered DEI learning opportunities but recognized the importance of doing so. Interviewees expressed a need for ongoing education on the impact racism has had on their communities, how racism impacts trust and buy-in, and who has historically held decision-making power.

“When trying to promote equity, there are activities that involve informing the public and [framing the discussion] so it’s not seen as reverse discrimination. Some people won’t understand, some people will understand and not want any part of it. This will change some of the work we are doing—[we] recognize there will be some who revolt against that type of change.”

—Grantee Interviewee

Interviewees from three projects said there has been some resistance from individuals in their communities to engage in community-wide conversations about equity. One interviewee said they had encountered individuals who questioned the continued impact of racism in modern society. For example, a meeting attendee stated, “I know you keep saying that racism is a thing, but I don’t think it really is in our community” during a discussion about systemic racism. Following this meeting, the interviewee provided education about the history of systemic racism in the community. While frustrating, the interviewee said this experience provided an opportunity to engage in difficult conversations and to further align the community behind the project’s goals.

Overcoming Bureaucratic or Legislative Barriers

Bureaucratic policies and legislation can intentionally or unintentionally create barriers for CWCC projects in their efforts to improve equity in their communities. Interviewees from **seven projects identified bureaucratic or legislative barriers as a challenge**. For example, one interviewee shared that bureaucratic contracting processes made it difficult to complete equity activities in a timely manner (e.g., one of the grantee’s contracts with a partner took months to establish, resulting in two of their three race equity activities being postponed). Another interviewee explained that legislation proposed in their state, if passed, would have limited discussions among government agency employees related to racial equity and effectively prohibit government spending on DEI trainings.

Conclusion and Implications

Over the course of their projects, CWCC grantees and their partners have reported progress in identifying and beginning to address inequities impacting the families they serve. To do this, all of the CWCC projects took steps to **engage community members and individuals with lived experience (especially in the child welfare system) in program design and implementation**. To promote more equitable access to services, projects **adapted their programming to better meet families' needs and circumstances**. Projects also **embedded equity as a guiding principle in their work** by prioritizing equity activities as agenda items in regular meetings and providing DEI trainings to grantee staff and partners. **Projects also continued to take steps to patiently build trust among families and agencies**, especially among families of color and families living in poverty who are overrepresented in the child welfare system. Finally, projects turned to **data to identify and strategically address inequities**. Most grantees used the available supplemental equity funding and said that it provided a rare opportunity to implement new equity-promoting activities or increase the reach of their existing activities.

Despite perceived progress, there are still areas for growth around equity within the communities served by CWCC projects. Specifically, interviewees noted the need for more specialized services, continuous self-education about and commitment to equity, and strategies to overcome bureaucratic and legislative barriers. Despite this, they described continually striving to place equity at the forefront of their work and emphasized the importance of equity for strengthening families and communities.

Interviewees indicated that their projects benefited from the knowledge of individuals with lived experience in their communities. An especially salient area for growth that emerged was the multi-step process needed to authentically engage with individuals with lived experience. While engagement equips projects with knowledge that can inform how to best meet community needs, grantee and partners must be ready to see individuals with lived experience as equal partners in the work and act on their recommendations as necessary. Grantees and their partner organizations reported that individuals with lived experience provided invaluable input into project planning and implementation throughout the grant period, and that this not only supported the success of their projects, but also contributed to their broader efforts to increase equity in the child welfare system.

The learnings described in this brief not only hold promise for addressing inequities in the communities served by CWCC projects, but can also inform other communities' efforts as they continue towards a focus on prevention, and on building protective factors that enhance child and family well-being. Replicating the strategies implemented by CWCC projects can help advance equity in these community efforts and begin to welcome individuals who have historically been left out into discussions and decision making. The efforts of the CWCC projects highlight the importance of ensuring strategies to enhance equity are central to system transformation.

“[T]he racial equity [funding] was something that we’ve never had before, [and] it fit within our delivery of what we [were] doing, but we’re not going to ever get that money again. I wish we would because I think it’s something that’s needed.”

—Grantee Interviewee

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