Change and Implementation AT A GLANCE

Capacity Building CENTER FOR STATES

Problem Exploration

Problem exploration is the process of identifying **what** needs to change, **why** it needs to change, and **how we know** that it needs to change. Teams that fully understand the underlying causes of their problems are more likely to choose and implement a solution that will make a difference. No matter what the identified problem is, the equitable solution will require an examination of various sources of data and evidence, an intentional focus on racial equity, and a problem exploration process that authentically integrates the perspectives and priorities of the people most affected, including those with lived experience.

What It Takes to Get It Done

- ☐ Identify a problem
- ☐ Create a data plan to explore the problem:
  - ○ Identify research questions
  - ○ Assess data sources (e.g., administrative data, surveys, focus groups, case reviews)
  - ○ Determine data analyses
  - ○ Identify staff responsible
- ☐ Collect and analyze the data
- ☐ Identify possible contributing factors and possible root causes of the problem
- ☐ Explore and validate possible root causes
- ☐ Isolate the root cause(s) to address

Get the Most Out of Problem Exploration

Before you get started:
- ◆ Recruit a diverse team that includes:
  - ❖ **Lived expertise:** Youth, families, and communities served by your agency and affected by the problem
  - ❖ **Data expertise:** A deep understanding of data limitations, complexities, and context, and an explicit focus on racial equity in data collection and analysis—consider team members with training in culturally responsive and racially equitable evaluation and assessment approaches
  - ❖ **Facilitation expertise:** Skills necessary to lead conversations about racial equity

As you develop your data plan:
- ◆ Assess your ability to disaggregate data by race, ethnicity, and other intersecting factors for better insights
- ◆ Develop ethical data sharing and data integration policies
- ◆ Ensure research questions and data reflect the values and ideas of lived experts

While collecting and analyzing data, identify how your team will:
- ◆ Use qualitative data and guided discussions to explore and understand the underlying reasons for differences in experiences and outcomes for different racial and ethnic groups
- ◆ Analyze data and evidence on the contributing factors and root causes of the problem
- ◆ Identify who is most affected by the identified problem
- ◆ Gather input on root causes from youth and families of color with lived experience in child welfare
- ◆ Recognize and address cultural and implicit biases affecting interpretation of the data

Consider this:
- ◆ Using an equity impact assessment throughout a change and implementation process can help teams better understand problems and determine whether actions are likely to contribute to equity or inequity.
- ◆ Asking for the perspectives of people of color and believing what they share about their experience with the child welfare system are critical to understanding the root causes of problems and effectively addressing them.

Explore a Problem's Underlying Root Cause With "5 Whys"

Root cause analysis is a structured process for identifying why a problem occurs and what to address so that the problem does not continue or happen again. The 5 Whys method is an easy way to explore the underlying causes of a problem. Simply ask partners "why?" to drill down into the problem (e.g., "Why are fathers not receiving services?"). With each response, again ask, "why?" (five or more times) until there are no new responses and a root cause emerges (e.g., "Because our agency culture focuses more on mothers and does not equally value the potential role of fathers."). Teams should gather data and evidence, as needed, to verify partner insights and hypotheses about the problem. Be sure to include people with lived experience in your analysis (e.g., ask fathers with child welfare experience why they believe fathers are not receiving services).

Creating a visual illustration (such as a fishbone diagram) to map out contributing factors is another method to delve into underlying causes of a problem. Using an ecological approach can increase focus on systemic and structural causes.

> Change and implementation is not necessarily a stepwise process. You may move back and forth between problem exploration steps and you may revisit steps as you learn more about the problem, its root cause, and who is most affected by it.

Key Takeaways

- Using data to dig deeper helps:
  - Demonstrate there is a problem
  - Explore the nature and root cause(s) of the problem
  - Determine who is most affected
  - Examine areas of strong practice
  - Identify an appropriate response
- Disaggregating data helps identify where problems are occurring and characteristics of those most affected.
- Gathering diverse perspectives is critical to truly understanding a problem. Include partners such as agency staff (from frontline workers to leadership), youth, families, community members, system partners (e.g., courts, tribes, service providers), and others.
- Effective problem exploration is not possible without centering the perspectives and priorities of the people most affected by the problem, including youth, families, and the communities served by the agency.

Looking for more?

- Explore additional problem exploration resources.
- See Change and Implementation in Practice for more information about other change and implementation topics.
- Find questions for consideration at each phase of the process in "Focusing on Race Equity Throughout Change and Implementation."
- Learn more about the integration of lived expertise in "Strategies for Authentic Integration of Family and Youth Voice in Child Welfare."

Key Change and Implementation Topics

Once the problem to be addressed has been agreed upon and the root cause has been identified, it is time to develop a theory of change.

Click on each icon in the Change and Implementation graphic for more information.

Children's Bureau