

Strategic Planning in Child Welfare:

Strategies for Meaningful Youth, Family, and Other Partner Engagement



Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

Meaningful youth, family, and other partner engagement in ongoing strategic planning, monitoring, and reporting efforts is crucial to child welfare agencies' success in achieving their goals and improving outcomes for children, youth, and families. These efforts include states' 5-year Child and Family Services Plans (CFSPs), Annual Progress and Services Reports (APSRs), Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) and CFSR Program Improvement Plans (PIPs), annual disaster planning, and title IV-E prevention planning.

Engaging youth, families, and other partners is vital to systems improvement efforts. Federal regulations (e.g., title IV-B requirements) require states to consistently engage partners such as youth, families, agencies, other service providers, Tribes, courts, and community members in ongoing consultation related to strategic planning, monitoring, and reporting. In August 2019, the Children's Bureau (CB) issued ACYF-CB-IM-19-03, an Information Memorandum (IM) on "engaging, empowering, and utilizing family and youth voice in all aspects of child welfare to drive case planning and system improvement" (Children's Bureau, 2019, August 1). The IM continues to be foundational to how the field moves forward in partnership with parent, family, and youth voice to achieve a well-functioning child welfare system (Children's Bureau, 2019). In addition, the CFSR specifically assesses youth, family, and partner engagement and collaboration with families. Throughout each year, states also work to improve child and family outcomes and agency functioning via state-initiated continuous quality improvement (CQI) efforts and other change initiatives. The CB publication [A Guide for Implementing Improvement Through the CFSP and CFSR](#) offers information on working with youth, families, courts, and other partners on the CFSP and CFSR.

Exhibit 1 (page 2) highlights the cyclical nature of these processes and how their components interact with each other over time to form a cohesive and ongoing strategic planning and monitoring effort. Through their participation in these activities, youth, families, and other partners help states define a vision and set goals to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families and inform progress toward those goals (Children's Bureau, n.d.).

This brief focuses largely on engaging families and youth but also addresses working with Tribes, courts, and community partners in planning, implementing, and monitoring improvement in a child welfare system. It discusses potential barriers to meaningful partner engagement and provides strategies for overcoming them across the strategic planning processes. A companion brief in the Strategic Planning in Child Welfare series [Integrating Efforts for Systems Improvement](#) helps agencies align priorities and realize efficiencies among their planning, monitoring, and reporting processes.

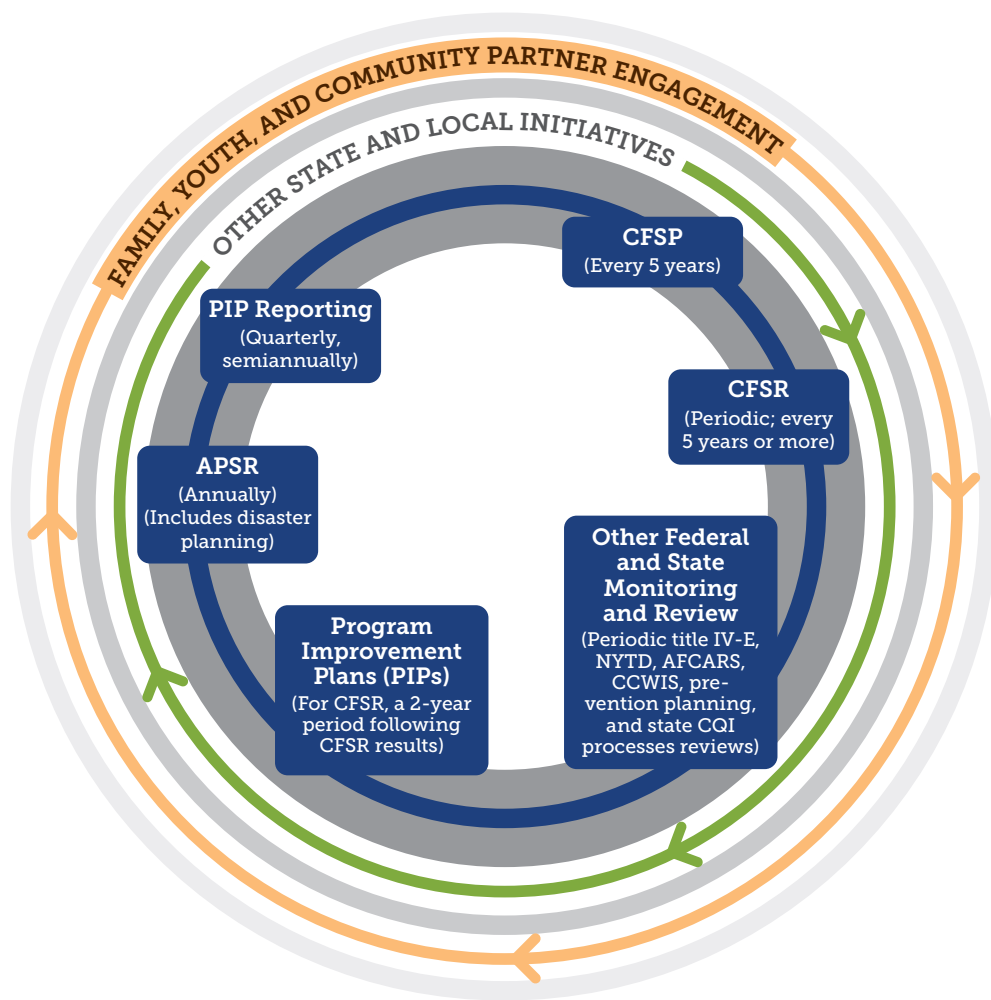
Read This If:

You want to learn about the benefits of and strategies for engaging youth, families, and other partners in strategic planning, monitoring, and reporting work.

In This Brief:

- ◆ [Importance of Youth, Family, and Partner Participation in Strategic Planning, Monitoring, and Reporting](#)
- ◆ [The Agency's Partners in Strategic Planning, Monitoring, and Reporting](#)
- ◆ [When to Engage Youth, Families, and Other Partners](#)
- ◆ [Creating an Agency Culture That Encourages Youth, Family, and Partner Engagement](#)
- ◆ [Potential Barriers to Youth, Family, and Partner Engagement](#)
- ◆ [How to Engage Youth, Families, and Other Partners in Strategic Planning, Monitoring, and Reporting](#)
- ◆ [Appendix A: Sample Agenda for an Initial Meeting With Partners](#)
- ◆ [Appendix B: Stakeholder Engagement Assessment Checklist](#)

Exhibit 1: Integrated Planning, Monitoring, and Reporting



Federal Processes

Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP): A 5-year, long-term strategic plan detailing a jurisdiction's vision and goals to improve its child welfare system.

Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR): An annual report that presents an update on a state's progress toward the goals and objectives defined in its CFSP and outlines the planned activities for the following fiscal year.

Child and Family Services Review (CFSR): A process that monitors state child welfare systems by assessing seven outcomes in three outcome areas (safety, permanency, and well-being) and seven systemic factors. The CFSR is conducted in rounds; the third concluded in 2018, and the fourth will start in fiscal year 2022.

Program Improvement Plans (PIPs): Plans that aim to create systemic change based on the results from federal and state monitoring, including the CFSR.

Other Federal and State Monitoring: Processes through which CB and state agencies systematically gather data and assess child welfare services to measure compliance with regulations and the achievement of outcomes to promote improvement in performance.

PIP Reporting: These regular reports (quarterly, semiannually) monitor implementation of interventions and efforts to achieve PIP goals (e.g., CFSR PIP and other PIP Progress Reports).

Disaster Planning: A federally mandated process of planning for disasters at child welfare agencies that specify how an agency will continue operations. Disaster planning is part of the CFSP and APSR cycles.

Importance of Youth, Family, and Partner Participation in Strategic Planning, Monitoring, and Reporting

Engaging youth, families, and other partners in strategic planning provides clear benefits to both the agency and the participants. Some benefits to the agency include (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, 2004; State Government of Victoria [AU] Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011):

- ◆ Higher quality, more inclusive decision-making
- ◆ Enhanced access to useful information and data to inform planning and decision-making processes
- ◆ Greater involvement in planning services that better meet community needs
- ◆ Enhanced community confidence in agency initiatives

Benefits to partners such as families, youth, community service providers, court representatives, and Tribal representatives, include (Children's Bureau, 2019):

- ◆ Greater opportunities to contribute directly to policy and program development
- ◆ More open and transparent lines of communication, increasing the accountability of government agencies

- ◆ An increase in innovation that has the potential to improve outcomes for youth and families
- ◆ Greater family and youth access to decision-making processes, resulting in the delivery of more efficient and responsive services
- ◆ Support to youth development and growth
- ◆ Early identification of overlap between family, youth, and partner expertise and agency work, encouraging integrated and comprehensive solutions to complex policy issues
- ◆ A more coordinated response to community needs when disasters occur

The Agency's Partners in Strategic Planning, Monitoring, and Reporting

In this context, a **partner** is an individual or group who has an active, vested interest in the outcome of an organization's actions. A **key partner** is any individual or group who is significantly affected by an organization's actions and/or has considerable influence on those actions (e.g., youth, families) (Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center, 2013). Partners can be internal (e.g., resource families, youth) or external (e.g., juvenile justice system) to a child welfare system.

Since most strategic planning, monitoring, and reporting processes described above are carried out by teams, paying special attention to team diversity is an important aspect of engaging youth, families, and other partners in strategic planning and monitoring work. The composition of teams should be considered and updated throughout the strategic planning process, but key partners who should consistently participate in a child welfare strategic planning process include (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018; Children's Bureau, 2016):

- ◆ Youth representatives (including youth currently in care, as well as young adults over age 18 who may or may not still be receiving services)
- ◆ Family members (e.g., parents, relatives, kinship caregivers)
- ◆ Resource families
- ◆ Child welfare agency internal partners, such as state and local agency staff, training staff, contract staff, supervisors, and administrators
- ◆ Tribal representatives
- ◆ Court representatives (e.g., attorneys ad litem, guardians ad litem, parent counsel, state or agency attorneys, court appointed special advocates, judges, Court Improvement Program (CIP) representatives)
- ◆ Representatives from state and local governments and professional and advocacy organizations
- ◆ External community partners (e.g., mental health, substance use disorder, juvenile justice, and developmental disabilities service providers; domestic violence coalitions; school systems)
- ◆ Representatives from racial, ethnic, and cultural community groups
- ◆ Formal and informal community leaders and representatives (e.g., religious leaders, community organization members)
- ◆ Local, state, and federal disaster management and response organizations
- ◆ Neighboring state and county agencies (if they are potentially affected by the plan)

Definitions of Key Terms

Partner: Individual or group, sometimes referred to as a "stakeholder," with a vested interest in the outcome of an organization's actions. Partners can be external or internal to the child welfare system.

Key partner: Individual or group who is significantly affected by an organization's actions and/or has considerable influence on those actions.

Team: Core working group of individuals responsible for carrying out the work of or leading an initiative.

Meaningful engagement: Active, ongoing collaboration of families, youth, and other partners with the child welfare system in a way that recognizes them as coequal participants in implementing practice and system change.

Court representatives have an important role to play in CFSP and CFSR processes. Federal law requires meaningful, ongoing collaboration between the courts and the state agency as a part of the CFSP and PIP. The following additional reasons underscore the importance of court participation in the CFSP and CFSR:

- ◆ The role of courts in child welfare is critical to improving outcomes for children, youth, and families.
- ◆ Court participation in the CFSP and CFSR can help shape the improvements that will benefit them (e.g., improving the effectiveness of agency legal representation, helping courts use data to understand better the status of child welfare outcomes, strengths, and needs within their jurisdictions).
- ◆ Input from the legal system is vital to assessing systemic factors affecting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children.
- ◆ Courts and child welfare agencies have joint responsibilities for improving outcomes for children and families.

Tribal representatives should also be engaged in strategic planning processes when they represent part of the communities being served or when collaborative action might be needed in the future (e.g., in disaster response and recovery). More information about building effective state-Tribal partnerships can be found at <http://collaboration.tribalinformationexchange.org/>. Agencies also can reach out to federal and nonprofit organizations to help provide current research and technical expertise in child welfare topics, as needed. More information on strategies to engage partners can be found in the “Identify and Reach Out to Partners” section below.

The CB publication *A Guide for Implementing Improvement Through the CFSP and CFSR* highlights the importance of creating teams for strategic planning that include a broad range of representation from various levels and jurisdictions within a state’s child welfare system, including key partners and leadership representation (Children’s Bureau, 2014b). These partners will bring to the table different roles, talents, perspectives, and skill sets, as well as diverse perspectives regarding the services provided by the child welfare agency and the outcomes it achieves. When putting together a team, it is also critical to consider racial and ethnic diversity in team representation and whether the team reflects the racial and ethnic identities, geographic identities (e.g., urban versus rural), and other groups the agency serves. When doing so, team leads should acknowledge that individual team members may self-identify as representing several different perspectives and identities (e.g., Black young adult with lived child welfare expertise serving on a domestic violence coalition) and balance representation accordingly.

Additional information on teaming strategies and guidance on building effective teams and teaming structures can be found in the Center’s [“Change and Implementation in Practice: Teaming”](#) brief.

When to Engage Youth, Families, and Other Partners

Engaging youth, families, and other partners in strategic planning, monitoring, and evaluation is a two-stage process. Regular partner engagement builds familiarity with agency work and relationships with agency staff, which can then be used to facilitate work on specific, time-limited processes.

Ongoing Engagement

Child welfare agencies need to work with youth, families, and other partners on a regular basis to receive input into strategic planning, disaster and prevention planning, policy review and development, and CQI. Agency staff should also communicate and engage with youth, families, and existing groups of partners (e.g., CIPs, youth advisory boards or councils, parent-partner programs, Tribal child welfare agency meetings, etc.) to build relationships and facilitate partner engagement in agency work.

Time-Limited Engagement

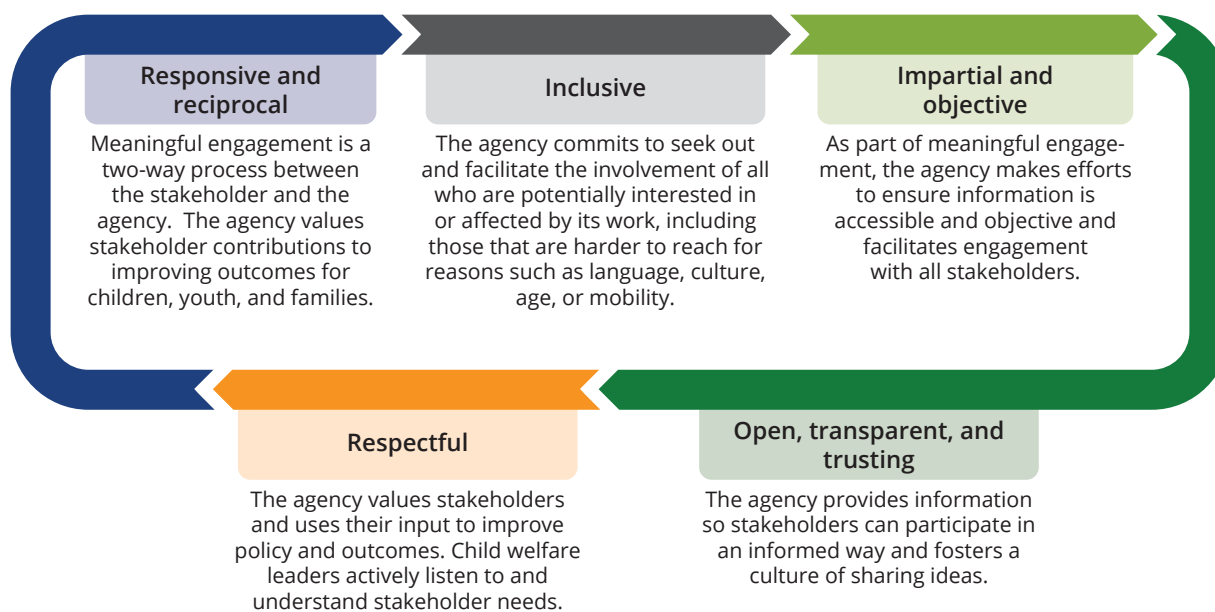
Agencies also need to ask partners to participate in specific processes with defined start and end dates, such as the CFSP and CFSR, and agency change initiatives (e.g., help in problem identification or plan for implementation of a PIP or other change initiative, or to take part in a CFSP or other federally mandated process). For a strategic planning process such as the CFSP or a review process such as the CFSR, for example, partners should be engaged at all phases of the process from visioning and assessing functioning to planning for and implementing a change, evaluating and monitoring results, and revising the plan as needed (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, 2004).

Working on disaster planning and response at a child welfare agency presents a special case since it is both an annual, federally mandated process and, potentially, a point-in-time activity if a disaster occurs. Partners engaged in this process should be aware of this additional time commitment, and youth and families should be compensated accordingly. If a disaster occurs, agencies should make a plan to provide referrals to trauma-informed care for all partners, who may be suffering the effects of a disaster while simultaneously working to assist others, as detailed in the agencies’ disaster plans.

Creating an Agency Culture That Encourages Youth, Family, and Partner Engagement

To effectively engage youth, families, and other partners in agency work, agency leadership and staff need to work at building and maintaining a culture that supports their meaningful participation. The qualities of an agency culture that supports youth, family, and partner engagement can be found in exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2: The Qualities of an Agency Culture That Supports Youth, Family, and Partner Engagement



(Adapted from State Government of Victoria (AU) Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011.)

In striving to establish an agency culture with these qualities, team leaders should consider the approaches that would be most useful for engaging diverse partners in agency planning, monitoring, and reporting efforts. For example, agencies may conduct community outreach to identify team members with a variety of perspectives. These conversations often provide the most valuable perspective around the challenges agencies face and the discovery of possible solutions. At every stage, community team members can help ensure that the team has a full picture of the issues being addressed and can facilitate the selection of culturally responsive solutions to identified problems (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018). Agencies should also make resources available to support partners' full participation in team processes (e.g., language interpreters), offer compensation where appropriate, and provide coaching to staff to support dialogue around potentially challenging topics (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018).

Additional important qualities of an agency culture that supports effective family and youth engagement, collaboration, and partnership include (Center for States, 2019):

- ◆ **Leadership buy-in and commitment to youth, family, and partner engagement** (including modeling engagement at all levels of agency practice, implementing policies that promote youth and family engagement, and encouraging and rewarding staff and partner initiative and creativity in engaging youth and families)
- ◆ **Organizational norms and values that prioritize collaborating with youth and families** (including becoming a learning organization, practicing the values of cultural competence and cultural humility, and understanding and managing implicit bias at all levels of the agency)
- ◆ **Workforce attitudes, buy-in, and motivation to sustain youth, family, and partner engagement** (including ensuring that all staff have the same understanding of the importance of youth, family, and partner engagement and making sure all staff have the tools and knowledge they need to work with youth, families, and partners effectively)

Agency staff can help prepare youth, families, and other partners by informing them regarding what to expect from their involvement, communicating how their input will be used, sharing relevant information on a regular basis, and supporting open, transparent dialogue (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2011b). Having a designated staff member who can meet with all participants both before and after meetings allows them to ask questions and clarify anything they don't understand without having to do it in front of the group. This allows them to feel more supported and better able to fully engage and participate in the work of the agency. A partner engagement assessment checklist like the one in appendix B can help agencies better understand where they are in the process of engaging youth, families, and partners.

It is also critical to ensure that agency staff—including frontline staff, managers, training staff, and others—are trained in best practices for working with youth, families, and other partners as equals. One effective strategy is to use coaching to build family, youth, and partner engagement skills among staff. The Center's brief "[Becoming a Family-Focused System: Strategies for Building a Culture to Partner With Families](#)" can help agencies identify additional steps they can

take to improve their agency culture of engaging with youth, families, and other partners. For more information on partnering with youth and families and a matrix showing the levels of authentic partnership, see also the Center's publication "[Strategies for Authentic Integration of Family and Youth Voice in Child Welfare.](#)"

Potential Barriers to Youth, Family, and Partner Engagement

While there are many long-term benefits to meaningfully engaging youth, families, and other partners in strategic planning, there are also barriers both for agencies and their partners that can stand in the way, including (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council, 2017; Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center, 2013):

Potential Challenges For All Groups

- ◆ Unclear purpose for the engagement and lack of clarity about roles and level of effort
- ◆ Meetings that discuss a range of issues but do not focus on the goals at hand

Potential Challenges for Youth, Families, and Other Agency Partners

- ◆ Logistical challenges such as lack of transportation, or lack of access to childcare, among others
- ◆ Lack of time or competing priorities
- ◆ An agency culture that does not support meaningful engagement (as described above)
- ◆ Lack of regular, ongoing partner engagement efforts by the agency
- ◆ Resistance from agency staff to working with youth, families, and other partners as equals

Potential Challenges for Agency Staff

- ◆ Agency staff who lack skills to have potentially difficult conversations with partners, including families and youth
- ◆ Lack of culturally responsive skills among agency staff to facilitate effective partner engagement

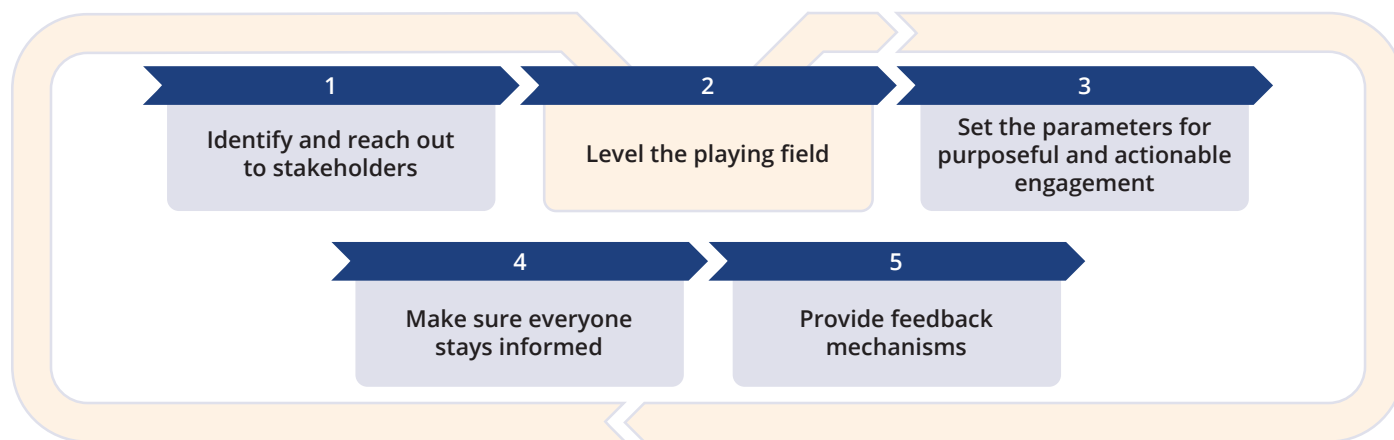
A challenge faced by many agencies is the prevalence of an agency culture that makes it difficult to engage youth and families in a meaningful way. Some elements may include dismissing the validity of lived expertise, tokenism, and a lack of understanding of how to work with families and youth as equal partners. An additional barrier may be the fact that some families view their interactions with child welfare systems negatively, which colors their attitudes about voluntarily engaging with the agency in any way, even if such interactions would be beneficial (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). In addition, agencies may hesitate to engage families in agency work due to current or pending legal challenges.

Some strategies to address barriers to youth, family, and other partner engagement and participation can be found below in the section "Level the Playing Field."

How to Engage Youth, Families, and Other Partners in Strategic Planning, Monitoring, and Reporting

Incorporating the tasks below into agency processes can help agencies engage youth, families, and other partners in planning, monitoring, and evaluating processes (exhibit 3). The tasks also help ensure that agency staff and the other participants can work together effectively throughout the process.

Exhibit 3. Tasks of Partner Engagement and Collaboration



Although exhibit 3 shows a sequence of steps, it is important to realize that different agencies may be in different phases in the process of engaging youth, families, and other partners, reflecting previous efforts in this area.

For example, while some agencies will start at step 1 above, others may start at step 3 or 4. Agencies also may need to move back and forth among some or all of these steps as they work to engage partners in various agency processes. While “level the playing field” is listed as step 2 in the process (because it is important to understand for whom the playing field is being leveled), it is actually foundational in the work of engaging youth, families, and partners at every stage. The arrow emerging from step 2 that encircles the other steps illustrates this idea.

1. Identify and Reach Out to Partners

As described above, partner engagement works as a coordinated, two-stage process in which agencies engage partners throughout the year to gain input into ongoing processes as well as create a pool of available participants (or reaching out to established groups) for point-in-time processes like the CFSP and CFSR, and annual disaster planning. It’s important to note that, even during the CFSP and CFSR, ongoing engagement efforts for other agency projects and processes will continue (Children’s Bureau, 2014b).

Reaching Out to Potential Partners

Once agencies identify partner networks or groups in their jurisdictions, staff in charge of strategic planning, CQI, data gathering, and other similar processes should ask to attend meetings of these groups, such as:

- ◆ CIP
- ◆ Private provider association
- ◆ Youth Advisory Board or Council
- ◆ Foster and adoptive parent groups
- ◆ Parent Partner Program
- ◆ Interagency workgroups
- ◆ Other organizational or community group involved in child welfare work

Doing so will serve two purposes simultaneously: gathering input on agency services and initiatives and building relationships that will facilitate the inclusion of group members in processes like the CFSP and CFSR. Staff should email the meeting organizer, describe their goals for attending, and ask to be placed on the meeting agenda as a presenter or participant.

For point-in-time processes like the CFSP and CFSR, child welfare agency leaders will need to appoint a diverse core implementation team to lead these processes on behalf of the agency and to engage key partners in the work. This core implementation team will be responsible for engaging diverse partners in the work and incorporating their voices into the plan’s goals, strategies, recommended interventions, and evaluation work. Agency staff members will identify key partners to serve on the implementation team, reach out to them, and clearly communicate the team’s function (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018).

When recruiting family members, youth, and other partners for participation in agency initiatives, agency staff should focus on the potential benefits of participation to the partners. For example, benefits for youth might be the opportunity to contribute to policy and service decisions and professional experience (California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, 2016). Once agency staff responsible for partner engagement have made connections, they should take care to maintain them. This does not need to always occur through face-to-face conversations since using email, LinkedIn, and other electronic platforms has become a time-efficient way to keep in touch.

Agencies should make every possible effort to engage multiple families, youth, and other partners to avoid tokenism and to reflect multiple perspectives from the communities the agency serves. As a best practice, agencies should attempt to not always engage the same young people and families for all projects. Youth and family members who have worked on agency initiatives may be able to offer referrals to identify additional participants. Whenever possible, agencies should offer to compensate young people and families for their time.



The Center’s brief on racial equity in change and implementation helps teams consider ways to be intentional about advancing race equity while forming teams and implementing new child welfare programs and practices. Find the brief and other change and implementation resources at <https://ca-pacity.childwelfare.gov/states/resources/change-implementation-focusing-on-race-equity>.

State Highlight

One large jurisdiction decided to engage in a collaborative strategic planning process in close cooperation with families, youth, other service agencies, and community partners to create a child-centric strategic plan that is “data-driven, informed by best practices, connects all child welfare services in the jurisdiction, and articulates measurable goals and timeframes.”

As a first step the agency held a series of meetings across the jurisdiction to gather ideas for plan development. Hundreds of participants represented a variety of partners including children and youth, parents, resource and adoptive parents, child welfare advocates, community providers, community members, school districts, faith-based organizations, early childhood caregivers and educators, service agency staff and administrators, court and court-appointed staff, university staff, and philanthropic organizations. The process also included focus groups for transition-age youth in foster care and out of care, parents, kinship caregivers, resource families, and frontline staff.

Additional sources of input for the strategic plan included the agency’s mission statement, other jurisdictional documents, and consultations with agency department leads. After the plan was developed, it was reviewed and vetted by key participants in this process.

2. Level the Playing Field

“Leveling the playing field” refers to developing partnerships based on **equitable participation, shared responsibilities, and joint decision-making**. Leveling the playing field is foundational to effectively working with youth, families, and other partners at every stage of collaboration. Agencies should not only ask partners to provide feedback or comment on data or documents after the fact, but offer real responsibilities and leadership roles as early in the project as is feasible to do so. As such, the work of the team can be shared among its members, both agency staff and partners, including youth and families. In addition, youth and family perspectives that are obtained early in the process can provide valuable perspectives that may shape the understanding of needed solutions.

Agency staff working together with family and youth partners should be aware of the existence a power differential (difference in the amount of authority and privilege) between them and strive to mitigate it. For example, all partners should be briefed on the background and goals of the project they are working on in everyday, non-jargon language so that all team members can start work with the same level of information. Agency staff should be prepared to be open to diverse perspectives and modes of communication that may be different than ones they normally encounter. On each team, the viewpoints of family and youth participants represent lived expertise and as such should be given the highest consideration.

Addressing Potential Barriers to Effective Partnership

Leveling the playing field also requires addressing barriers to participation that may exist among various groups. In particular, agencies may face challenges in recruiting some families to participate in agency processes if their previous experiences with the child welfare system have not been positive, they feel that their voices are not valued, or they do not feel “seen” or represented by the agency. In fact, families and youth who may have had a difficult relationship with the child welfare system are critically important to engage and agencies should make continued efforts to do so. Individuals with lived experience have expertise that can help the agency understand the root causes of the challenges they face in serving children, youth, and families and provide useful input on strategic solutions.

To successfully engage families and youth, agencies should work with leaders, managers, and staff to educate them about the substantial value of youth, family, and partner participation in agency work and about the skills they need to involve these partners in co-creation and shared decision-making. Agency staff need to work with their partners from the outset of their involvement with the child welfare system. Involving families and youth early on in their own case planning and decision-making can help build trust and relationships that can form the foundation of further positive engagement with the agency (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). As relationships, trust, and skills are developed, families and youth can work with the agency in an increased capacity by serving on decision- or policy-making bodies or strategic planning and other teams, as described above (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2011a).

When planning meetings involving youth, families, and other partners, planners should make it as easy as possible for external partners, especially youth and families, to participate. Time and scheduling issues for all partners can be addressed by being open about the level of effort required and leveraging technology (such as Zoom, Teams, or Google Meet) for communication and meeting purposes. For example, some meetings can be held in the evenings to allow for

work and school schedules. The agency should offer to cover transportation or other costs to youth and families during the time they spend working on the project. A stipend should be made available to youth and families to cover at least a portion of the expenses associated with this work. This step will support an environment where youth and families can take part in this work on an equitable basis with other participants.

Co-Creating With Partners

To facilitate an equitable division of labor among team members, agency teams should create workgroups to work on parts of ongoing processes such as strategic planning, disaster planning, prevention planning and other planning processes, and CQI. Partners can then be assigned to different roles on workgroups based on their interest, skills, and time capacity so that their participation does not have to be a time- and labor-intensive endeavor (Center for States, 2018). To ensure youth and family representation in every workgroup, agencies should plan for a continuum of additional engagement efforts (as well as additional compensation for their time).

Agencies can work to establish trust by working with all partners as equals, sharing data, and requesting assistance as appropriate. The communication plan that is created at the outset of any process should include two-way communication strategies for providing relevant information to internal and external partners, then gathering and analyzing feedback throughout the working period. This communication style emphasizes both receiving and providing information and ideas in an active, responsive, and receptive manner (Children's Bureau, 2014b).

State Highlight

A state child welfare agency director had regular meetings and a comfortable relationship with the CIP Director, and they served on several committees together. While they shared their CFSR results and CIP plan with one another, they did not engage in any specific joint planning or data sharing efforts. When it was time to kick off the CFSP process, the agency decided to invite the CIP Director (and other partners) to participate in CFSP planning and to start that process by sharing some agency data. While agency staff were anxious about how the CIP staff would react to some of the data that showed areas where the agency was not performing well, they presented that data as an opportunity for improvement and asked for input from all participants. CIP staff responded by identifying data they had that could also inform the issue, and asking if they could bring a judge into the discussion as well. The decision by the agency to trust the CIP staff with this information marked the beginning of more meaningful collaboration between the two organizations.

3. Set the Parameters for Purposeful and Actionable Engagement

Meaningful partner engagement on strategic planning, CQI, disaster planning, and other agency improvement teams works best when youth, families, partners, and all team participants have clarity about the team's goals, scope, timeframe, roles, and deliverables. Understanding these foundational aspects of a project can help all participants better understand how they can contribute to its success (Children's Bureau, 2016).

Create Foundational Documents

Creating foundational documents to guide the work of an initiative is an important early step, though the type of documents required depend on the work being done and where the agency is in the process. Generally, three foundational documents can support partner engagement: a team mission statement, a team charter, and an open communication plan. It is important to know that these are not set in stone but are living documents that may need to be amended over time as needs, responsibilities, and roles evolve.

Team Mission Statement

As a first step, the team's purpose should be clarified through the creation of a team mission statement that answers the question, "What is the need that the team is addressing?" Having a clear statement will help align all team members regarding the purpose of the team from the beginning (Center for States, 2018).

Team Charter

Team leaders should clarify roles and expectations with team members early in the process. These topics and others (such as scope, timeframe, decision-making authority, communication strategy) will be covered in the team charter, a formal document created by the team to clarify and facilitate the team's work (Center for States, 2018). The creation of a work plan based on the team charter that further clarifies timeframes, roles, and responsibilities often is the next step.

Elements of a Team Charter

A strategic planning (or other improvement process) team charter should include the following elements:

- ◆ Team mission
- ◆ Goals and objectives for the work of team
- ◆ Scope, boundaries, and timeframe for completing the work
- ◆ Expected deliverables
- ◆ Decision-making authority
- ◆ Decision-making policy
- ◆ Brief description of communication strategies and frequency (more information will be contained in the communication plan)
- ◆ Description of the feedback loop needed to inform youth, families, and other partners about how their input influenced agency planning
- ◆ Roles and responsibilities
- ◆ Determination of how conflict will be managed

Adapted from Permanency Innovations Initiative Training and Technical Assistance Project, 2016.

Open Communication Plan

Developing a comprehensive open communication plan is critical for all participants to effectively work together. To remain fully engaged, all team participants need to have regular opportunities to share their ideas, thoughts, and opinions and weigh in on vital decisions. An open communication plan helps build trust among team members, without which the work of strategic planning or other agency processes would be much more difficult, if not impossible.

An effective communication plan:

- ◆ Ensures the flow of information between internal agency staff and external partners as appropriate
- ◆ Clarifies internal and external communication protocols and identifies the person responsible for maintaining them
- ◆ Provides relevant information to all participants (external and internal) so they have an opportunity to offer feedback, a critical step to the success of the team and its work
- ◆ Uses several communication mechanisms, including meetings (in-person and virtual), presentations, emails, and written documents (e.g., memos)

Facilitating Effective Meetings

To facilitate team meetings that foster meaningful collaboration and mutual learning, it is important to train and support staff in becoming effective meeting facilitators. To further engage external partners, agencies might consider asking some partners to serve as meeting cofacilitators where appropriate. Alternately, external partners can be asked to lead small group discussions if the group chooses to use that meeting format.

Effective facilitators manage meetings where participants feel valued and heard, results are accomplished, and precious time and resources are not wasted (Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center, 2013). The facilitator's role is key to the success of the meeting. Facilitator responsibilities include (Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center, 2013):

- ◆ Encouraging full participation by all participants
- ◆ Maintaining objectivity during group discussions
- ◆ Promoting mutual understanding and learning (common language, points of reference, context, etc.)
- ◆ Fostering inclusive solutions
- ◆ Understanding that the collective wisdom of the group is more powerful than one person's position
- ◆ Ensuring that the group reaches clear results from the meeting, including:
 - ◆ Determining action items and timelines
 - ◆ Taking responsibility for preparation and follow-up

A sample agenda for an initial meeting with partners can be found in appendix A.



The Center's brief on teaming strategies offers guidance on how to build effective teams and teaming structures, develop team charters, and implement communication plans. Find the brief and other teaming resources at <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/cqi/change-implementation/teaming/>.

4. Make Sure Everyone Stays Informed

For youth, families, and other partners to participate in agency planning processes effectively, they need to have regular access to information about the processes as well as information and data to help inform their conclusions, suggestions, and team decision-making. Before the first meeting with partners, agencies can provide them with an overview of the project and process in which they are participating. These orientation materials can include information about problems, the agency's mission and goals, team member roles, and communication. If such materials are not available, the agency should develop them (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2010).

Agencies should keep all participants informed with concrete and digestible information. This can first be done in an orientation meeting to discuss the information ahead of time. Participants can then receive a monthly email or newsletter that provides team members with time to process the information before meeting with the agency. Team members should also be provided with access to data collected by the agency. Relevant partners should be invited to meetings to discuss the data that concerns their area of interest or expertise, e.g., Youth Advisory Board representatives should be invited to discussions of data around service delivery to youth and families.

Regular communication with team members working on strategic planning, disaster and prevention planning, assessment, or evaluation should address the following items throughout the CFSP and CFSR processes, as appropriate (Children's Bureau, 2014b):

- ◆ Review of data and assessment of agency strengths and concerns
- ◆ Selection of priority areas for the CFSP and CFSR PIP
- ◆ Identification of goals, objectives, and target populations
- ◆ Selection of appropriate interventions
- ◆ Provision of implementation supports
- ◆ Implementation of interventions
- ◆ Assessment of processes and outcome data

State Highlight

One state's teaming efforts included actively engaging key partners and ensuring they had all the information they needed for meaningful participation in the CFSP. For partners to meaningfully participate on the CFSP team, they needed a clear understanding of the team's mission, the problems the team will address, the team's goals, what is expected of members, and how participation will occur. To meet this need, the state developed materials and a recording, made readily accessible via the web, that explained and defined the CFSP and how partners could contribute to the process. State representatives sent this information to their team members before their participation so that they could learn about the process and its purpose.

5. Provide Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms

To improve partner participation in a strategic planning, reporting, or evaluation process, agencies need to reach out to youth, families, and other partners throughout the year to give feedback regarding how the input they provided was used. Partners should be regularly informed of the progress and outcome(s) of any process in which they have participated and next steps. This encourages them to continue to connect with the engagement process, builds trust, and strengthens relationships that were established during the process. Agencies also should provide youth, families, and other partners with opportunities to provide feedback regarding agency engagement processes, their participation, and suggested areas for improvement.

The two-way communication plan and feedback loop that are created at the outset of any process should include strategies for continuing to communicate with all partners once the formal part of the process ends. This may help keep the momentum going and will encourage partners to participate in agency initiatives on a regular basis (Children's Bureau, 2014b).

Agency staff should make a sustained effort to continue to actively listen to all partners—especially children, youth, and families—and incorporate their perspectives into system improvements. One mechanism for this might be participation in the agency's ongoing CQI processes. Agencies also should establish a process to organize and track partner feedback so it can be properly considered, shared, and updated as the need arises.

Improvement initiatives in which youth, families, and other partners participated should be regularly highlighted in communication. If partners who worked with the agency see positive change because of their involvement in strategic planning or change initiatives, they're more likely to be involved in the future.

You've Taken the First Steps and Engaged Your Partners ... Now What?

Once an agency has processes in place to engage youth, families, and other partners in both ongoing and point-in-time involvement, it's time to begin working with them as equal partners. This will infuse multiple ideas and voices into activities such as strategic planning, disaster and prevention planning, setting priorities, conducting needs assessments, implementing changes, and evaluation.

Some potential ways agencies might work with partners in the context of agency and federal planning, monitoring, and reporting processes include:

- ◆ Establish a planning and implementation team comprised of a diverse group of key partners (including youth and families) to steer the system's strategic planning and reform efforts
- ◆ Evaluate data and evidence from the agency and its partners (e.g., courts, Tribes, service providers, etc.) and assess the child welfare system's performance on the CFSR statewide data indicators, child and family outcomes, systemic factors, and other key measures
- ◆ Draw conclusions about strengths and areas for improvement based on performance assessments, prioritize the findings, and establish the specific problems to be addressed in the improvement processes
- ◆ Engage in deeper problem exploration to identify possible contributing factors to problem areas, explore and validate potential root causes, and ultimately isolate the root causes to address through the reform effort (e.g., the 2020–2024 CFSP, annual disaster plan)
- ◆ Establish goals and objectives, identify strategies/interventions, and develop implementation plans that align across planning and improvement processes
- ◆ Implement and manage plans for improvement (e.g., from the current round of the CFSR PIP and the CFSP), including communicating the plans to all participants and supervising implementation to assess progress/improvements and make adjustments as necessary

Conclusion

Meaningfully engaging partners at all levels—including youth and families, community leaders, other social services providers, Tribes, and legal representatives—in agency strategic planning, disaster and prevention planning, review, evaluation, and other initiatives is critical to agencies' success in meeting their goals.

The strategies, considerations, and tools presented here encourage states to consider new ways of implementing ongoing, regular youth, family, and partner participation. States should also work to leverage teams and processes already in place such as CQI and monitoring, for example, as a foundation for increasing and improving the quality of partner engagement.

Genuine family and youth engagement, at both the case and system levels, is required by CB because it is essential to effective planning, practice, and reform and constitutes best practice. Youth, parents, and kin should be engaged in all aspects of practice and planning, from decision-making and goal setting in their individual cases to working to shape the child welfare system as a whole. For child welfare systems to achieve their goals and objectives and improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes, youth and families must have an equal voice in informing system improvement processes. Because they are the primary recipients of child welfare services, they have unique perspectives within the system and resulting expertise that can be used to inform planning and practice going forward.

Working With the Capacity Building Center for States

[The Capacity Building Center for States](#) (the Center) can provide customized, jurisdiction-specific services to help states prepare, develop, implement, and monitor CFSPs. This may include support and consultation related to engaging partners, as well as help with integrating the CFSP with all applicable state plans and system improvement processes. You can [find your state's Center Liaison](#) and their contact information on the Center website or visit the Center's [Contact Us](#) page for more details.

Let Us Know What You Think

Scan the QR code to the right or use this link: https://icfinternational.iad1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ebTvdTX-gRxYG3ae?Q_CHL=qr to access a short survey and let us know about your experiences using this publication.



References

- Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council. (2017). *Stakeholder engagement framework*. https://www.anmac.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/stakeholder_engagement_framework.pdf
- California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. (2016). *Supporting client involvement in implementation teams*. <http://www.cebc4cw.org/files/SupportingClientInvolvementInImplementationTeams.pdf>
- Capacity Building Center for Courts. (n.d.). *CFSR measures quick sheet*. <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/courts/topics/cqi/cqi-quick-sheets>
- Capacity Building Center for Courts. (n.d.). *Child and family services review: The role of courts and attorneys*. [Infographic]. <https://share.ipubknow.com/index.php/s/otyP2aWeN2rzskZ#pdfviewer>
- Capacity Building Center for Courts. (2015). *Child and family services reviews: How judges, court administrators and attorneys should be involved*. <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/courts/resources/child-and-family-services-review-how-judges-court-administrators-and-attorneys>
- Capacity Building Center for States. (2018). *Change and implementation in practice: Teaming*. Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Service. <https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/capacity/Blob/120413.pdf?r=1&rpp=10&upp=0&w=+NATIVE%28%27rec-no%3D120413%27%29&m=1>
- Capacity Building Center for States. (2019). *Becoming a family-focused system: Strategies for building a culture to partner with families*. Children's Bureau, Administration for Child and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/family-focused-system/strategies-for-building-a-culture-to-partner-with-families/>
- Capacity Building Center for States. (2019). *Strategies for the authentic integration of family and youth voice in child welfare*. Children's Bureau, Administration for Child and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/resources/strategies-for-authentic-integration-of-family-and-youth-voice-in-child-welfare>
- Capacity Building Center for Tribes. (n.d.). *Annotated agenda items*. <http://collaboration.tribalinformationexchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/AnnotatedAgendaItems082317.pdf>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). *Family engagement: Partnering with families to improve child welfare outcomes*. https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f_fam_engagement.pdf
- Children's Bureau. (n.d.). *State and tribal child and family services plan*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/programs/state-tribal-cfsp>
- Children's Bureau. (2014a). *Child and family services review fact sheet*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/cfsr-fact-sheet>
- Children's Bureau. (2014b). *A guide for implementing improvement through the CFSP and CFSR*. http://centerforchildwelfare.org/qa/qa_docs/IS_Guide_Final.pdf

- Children's Bureau. (2016). *Child and family services review procedures manual*. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cfsr_procedures_manual.pdf
- Children's Bureau. (2019, August 1). *Engaging, empowering, and utilizing family and youth voice in all aspects of child welfare to drive case planning and system improvement*. (IM-19-03). Administration for Children and Families. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-19-03>
- Children's Bureau. (2020). *Children's Bureau's young adult consultant and National Youth in Transition Database reviewer programs*. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/nytd_database_reviewer_programs.pdf
- Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs. (2014). *State-tribal consultation guide: An introduction for Colorado state agencies to conducting formal consultations with federally recognized American Indian tribes*. https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/CO_State_Tribal%20Consultation%20Guide.pdf
- National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement. (2004). *Strategic planning for child welfare agencies*. <http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/rcpdfs/strat.plan.pdf>
- National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care. (2011a). *Building family capacity for family involvement in child welfare*. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/BuildingFamilyCapacity.pdf>
- National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care. (2011b). *Building agency capacity for family involvement in child welfare*. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/BuildingAgencyCapacity.pdf>
- Permanency Innovations Initiative Training and Technical Assistance Project. (2016). *Teaming and communication linkages—Module 2: Building a team and writing a team charter*. [Brief]. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://diatoolkit.childwelfare.gov/sites/default/files/resources/Teaming_Module_2_Brief.pdf
- Salabarría-Peña, Y., Apt, B. S., & Walsh, C. M. (2007). *Practical use of program evaluation among sexually transmitted disease (STD) programs*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/program/pupestd/Step-1-SPREADS.pdf>
- State Government of Victoria (AU) Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2018). *Stakeholder engagement toolkit*. <https://dhhs.vic.gov.au/publications/stakeholder-engagement-and-public-participation-framework-and-toolkit>
- Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center. (2013). *Stakeholder engagement tools for action*. https://www.cssp.org/publications/general/WPIC_DCFS_Stakeholder_Engagement_Toolkit.pdf

Users may freely print and distribute this material crediting the Capacity Building Center for States. **Suggested citation:** Capacity Building Center for States. (2022). *Strategic planning in child welfare: Strategies for meaningful youth, family, and other partner engagement*. Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This product was created by the Capacity Building Center for States and funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, under contract number HHS-P2332015000711. This publication updates and expands on an earlier publication: *Strategic Planning in Child Welfare: Strategies for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement* (2018).

Appendix A: Sample Agenda for an Initial Meeting With Partners

The following sample agenda can be used to begin planning an initial meeting with all partners for the CFSP, CFSR, PIP, or agency change initiative (adapted from Center for Tribes, n.d.; Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs, 2014; and Salabarría-Peña, et al., 2007).

Location:

8:30–9 a.m.

Welcome and participant introductions.

9–9:30 a.m.

Overview of how stakeholders were selected; description of the agency initiative, mission, goals, and scope; and outcomes.

9:30–10:30 a.m.

Discussion of stakeholder interests, perceptions, and issues related to the project as well as any cultural considerations. First half of the session will be devoted to small group discussion, and the second half will be devoted to a report-out with the entire group.

10:30–10:45 a.m.

Break

10:45 a.m.–12 p.m.

Review stages of the project. Agency staff and stakeholders can brainstorm on how different stakeholders can be involved in providing input at the various stages and the possible roles that they can play.

12:00–1 p.m.

Lunch

1–2 p.m.

Review of current avenues of collaboration and communication, including a discussion of “what worked” and “what didn’t” in previous collaborations, as well as suggestions for improvement.

2–3:30 p.m.

Plan for next steps, which may include:

- ◆ Drafting a team mission statement, charter, and communication plan for ongoing stakeholder input
 - ◆ Beginning to plan a teaming structure, including the necessary workgroups to start the project
 - ◆ Identifying the date of the next meeting
-

3:30–3:45 p.m.

Break

3:45–4:30 p.m.

Question and answer session, closing comments, and adjourn.

Appendix B: Stakeholder Engagement Assessment Checklist

This brief checklist is intended to spark self-reflection, discussion, and planning regarding current stakeholder engagement practices at a child welfare agency. Individuals and teams can use the checklist to better understand current practices related to the agency's stakeholder engagement process. It can also be used as a prompt for small group discussions among members of a team. It is adapted from a toolkit developed by the Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center (2013). This checklist is intended for informational purposes only and is not intended to be used as a formal evaluation tool.

Inclusive and Respectful

- The agency regularly identifies and facilitates the participation of stakeholders whose interests, aspirations, and concerns are affected by the agency's work.
- Engagement practices help ensure that the different agendas of various stakeholders are represented.
- The diversity and culture of stakeholders are acknowledged and supported.
- Systems are in place to ensure that underrepresented, hard to reach, and marginalized groups are engaged in equitable and culturally appropriate ways.
- Stakeholder outreach strategies ensure that the right people are engaged: participants are fully representative of their group and have the appropriate skill set/knowledge base for the task at hand.
- Engagement is conducted in a manner that fosters mutual respect and trust.

Responsive and Reciprocal

- Collaboration and co-ownership of the engagement process are promoted.
- Departmental representatives and key decision-makers are accessible to stakeholders.
- Active listening is demonstrated by responding to the ideas and issues voiced by all stakeholders.
- Engagement processes encourage mutual learning.
- Stakeholder knowledge, perspectives, and experiences are highly valued as a resource.
- Systems are in place to solicit and use stakeholder feedback during planning processes.
- The knowledge and perspectives of stakeholders are consistently integrated into the agency's planning and decision-making activities.

Impartial and Objective

- Decision-making processes are discussed with stakeholders and defined from the beginning.
- The intended outcomes and progress of the project are regularly articulated to stakeholders.
- Agreements and ground rules for engagement processes are consistently honored.
- Realistic expectations are set and agreed to early in the process.
- Appropriate information about results and performance is reported through an agreed upon process.

Open, Transparent, and Trusting

- The boundaries of the engagement process, including the commitment of time and resources and scope, are clearly communicated to stakeholders.
- The process and provisions for two-way communication and feedback are established with the group from the beginning.
- The decisions and outcomes of meetings with stakeholders are well documented and shared openly.