



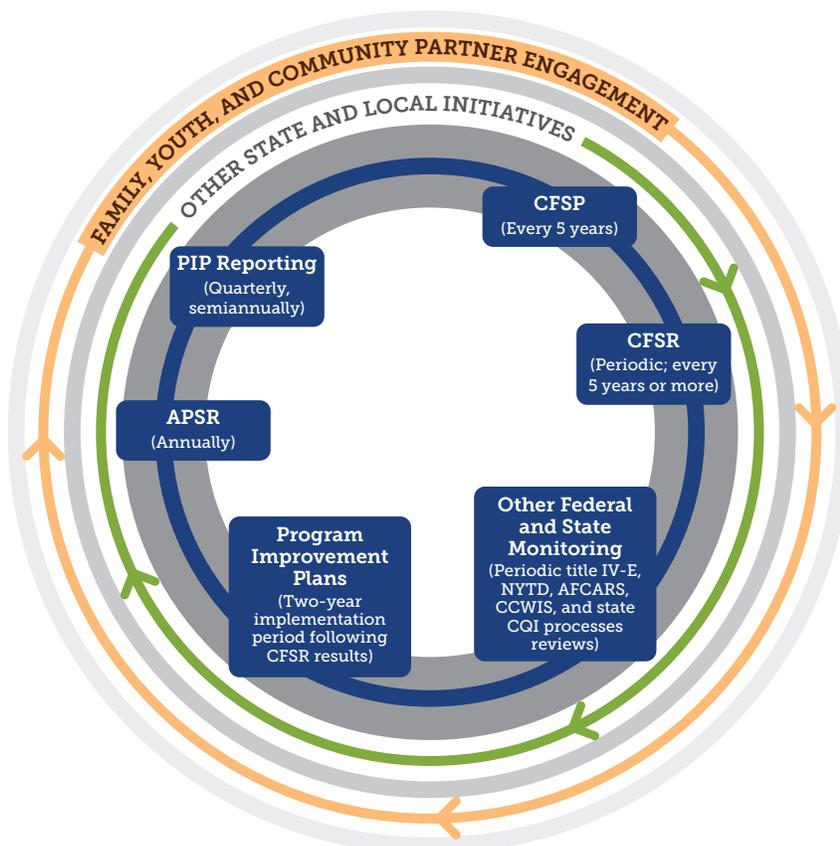
Strategic Planning in Child Welfare: Strategies for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement



Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

Engaging stakeholders 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 Plan (CFSP), the Annual Progress and Services Reports (APSR), and the Child and Family Services Review–Program Improvement Plan (CFSR/PIP). Stakeholder engagement is so vital to systems improvement efforts that federal regulations (e.g., title IV-B requirements) require states to consistently engage stakeholders such as agencies, organizations, and individuals in ongoing CFSP-related consultation and coordination processes. In addition, the CFSR specifically assesses stakeholder 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.

Exhibit 1: Integrated Planning, Monitoring, and Reporting (below) highlights the cyclical nature of these processes and how their components interface with each other over time to work together as a cohesive and ongoing strategic planning and monitoring effort. Through their participation in these activities, stakeholders will 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).



Federal Processes

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

Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR): An annual narrative report that presents an update on a state's progress toward meeting each goal and objective defined in their CFSPs, including any changes in goals and objectives. It outlines the planned activities and services for the following fiscal year, as well as all other program information required by the annual Program Instruction.

Child and Family Services Review (CFSR): A process that monitors state child welfare programs 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 and latest of which occurred from 2015 to 2018.

Program Improvement Plan (PIP): Following each CFSR round, states found not to be in substantial conformity with all outcome areas and systemic factors are required to create a PIP to address the areas that presented challenges during the review.

This brief addresses the importance of meaningful stakeholder engagement in child welfare agency strategic planning. It 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 stakeholder engagement and provides strategies for overcoming the barriers and achieving meaningful stakeholder engagement in strategic planning processes.

Importance of Stakeholder Participation in Strategic Planning

Stakeholder engagement provides clear benefits to both the agency and the stakeholders themselves. 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
- Services that meet community needs
- Enhanced community confidence in agency initiatives

Benefits to stakeholders (e.g., families, youth, court and tribal representatives, community service providers) include:

- 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 access to decision-making processes, resulting in the delivery of more efficient and responsive services
- Early identification of overlap between stakeholder and agency work, encouraging integrated and comprehensive solutions to complex policy issues

Who Are the Stakeholders?

A **stakeholder** is an individual or group who has an active, vested interest in the outcome of an organization's actions (as opposed to a "consumer" whose interest is more passive). A **key stakeholder** is any stakeholder who is significantly affected by an organization's actions and/or has considerable influence on those actions (Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center, 2013). Stakeholders can be internal or external to a child welfare system.

Since most of the processes described above are carried out by teams, team diversity is an important way to engage stakeholders in strategic planning and monitoring work carried out by a child welfare agency. The composition of teams should be considered and updated throughout the strategic planning process, but

Definitions of Key Terms

Stakeholder: Individual or group with a vested interest in the outcome of an organization's actions. Stakeholders can be external or internal to the child welfare system.

Team: Core working group of individuals responsible for carrying out the work of or leading an initiative (Children's Bureau, 2014b).

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

should always include agency leadership and staff, members from the community being served (including representatives from racial, ethnic, and cultural community groups), and representatives from other service organizations that support the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families, which may include courts, mental health organizations, etc. Key stakeholders who should participate in a child welfare strategic planning process include (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018; Children’s Bureau, 2016):

- 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)
- 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., birth families of origin, kinship caregivers)
- Resource families
- 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 organizational members)

Court representatives have a particularly important role to play in the CFSP and CFSR processes. Specific information about engaging court representatives at every stage of the process can be found in the "Child and Family Service Review: The Role of Courts and Attorneys" infographic and the "CFSR Measures Quick-sheet." Tribal representatives should also be engaged in strategic planning processes, as appropriate. More information about building effective state-tribal partnerships can be found at <http://collaboration.tribalinformationexchange.org/>.

Agencies can also reach out to federal and nonprofit organizations to help provide current research and technical expertise in child welfare topics, as needed. [The Capacity Building Center for States](#) can provide customized, jurisdiction-specific services to help states prepare, develop, implement, and monitor CFSPs. This may include support and consultation related to engaging stakeholders, as well as help with integrating the CFSP with all applicable state plans and system improvement processes.

More information on strategies to engage stakeholders can be found in the "Identify and Reach Out to Stakeholders" section below. 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 Should Stakeholders Be Engaged?

Engaging stakeholders in strategic planning, monitoring, and evaluation is a two-stage process. This means that child welfare agencies need to engage stakeholders year-round, while also asking them to participate in specific processes with defined start- and end-dates, such as the CFSP and CFSR, and agency change initiatives. Regular stakeholder engagement builds familiarity with agency work and relationships with agency staff, which can then be used to facilitate work on specific, time-limited processes.

Child welfare agencies are expected to work with stakeholders on a regular basis to provide input into strategic planning and CQI. Agency staff should communicate and engage with existing processes and groups of stakeholders (e.g., Court Improvement Programs, youth advisory boards or councils, parent-partner programs, tribal child welfare agency meetings, etc.) to build relationships and facilitate stakeholder engagement in agency work.

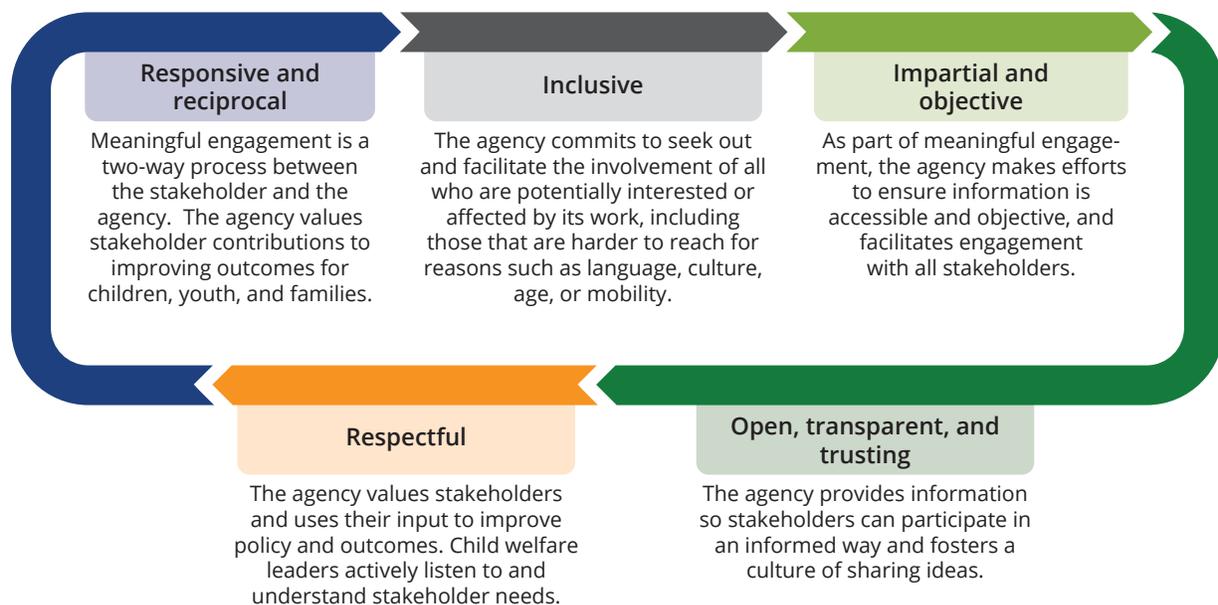
At times, however, stakeholder involvement will be needed in a specific, time-limited capacity on a project (e.g., help in problem identification or plan for implementation of a PIP or other change initiative, or to take part in a CFSP or other federally mandated process). For a strategic planning process such as the CFSP, for example, stakeholders should be engaged at all phases of the process from visioning and preparing the plan 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). 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).

How Can an Agency Create a Culture to Encourage Stakeholder Engagement?

The Children’s Bureau’s *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 stakeholders and leadership representation (Children’s Bureau, 2014b). These stakeholders 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.

To effectively engage stakeholders in agency work, agency leadership and staff need to work at building an agency culture that supports meaningful stakeholder participation. The qualities of an agency culture that supports stakeholder engagement can be found in exhibit 2 below.

Exhibit 2. The Qualities of an Agency Culture That Supports Stakeholder 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 stakeholders in agency processes such as strategic planning and would prepare agency staff for effectively working with stakeholders. For example, agencies may conduct community outreach to identify team members with a variety of perspectives, make resources available to support their full participation in team processes (e.g., language interpreters), and provide coaching to staff to support dialogue around potentially challenging topics (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018).

Agency staff can help prepare stakeholders 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 stakeholders 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 stakeholder engagement assessment checklist like the one in appendix B can help agencies better understand where they are in the process of engaging stakeholders.

What Are the Potential Barriers to Engaging Stakeholders?

A number of barriers exist to meaningfully engaging stakeholders in strategic planning, including (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council, 2017; Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center, 2013):

- Logistical challenges such as lack of time, lack of transportation, or lack of access to child care, among others
- An agency culture that does not support meaningful engagement (as described above)
- Lack of regular, ongoing stakeholder engagement efforts by the agency
- Resistance from agency staff to working with stakeholders as equal partners
- Agency staff who lack skills to have potentially difficult conversations with stakeholders, including families and youth
- 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
- Lack of culturally responsive skills among agency staff to facilitate effective stakeholder engagement

A challenge faced by many agencies is the difficulty of engaging parents in a meaningful way. Reasons include the barriers and dynamics that can exist between systems and those receiving services and the fact that some families view their interactions with child welfare systems negatively. This 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 stakeholder participation can be found below in the section, "Level the Playing Field."

How to Engage Stakeholders in Strategic Planning

Incorporating the tasks below into agency processes can help agencies engage stakeholders in planning, monitoring, and evaluating processes (exhibit 3). The tasks also help ensure that agency staff and stakeholders can work together effectively throughout the process. Though they are listed sequentially, agencies can start wherever they are in the process of collaborating with stakeholder in federal processes.

Exhibit 3. Tasks of Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration



1. Identify and Reach Out to Stakeholders

Engaging stakeholders and building and maintaining teams are essential to all aspects of the integrated planning and systems improvement processes (Children’s Bureau, 2014b). For child welfare agencies, stakeholder engagement works as a coordinated, two-stage process. An agency works to engage stakeholders throughout the year to gain input into ongoing processes and collect data that will inform ongoing projects. This regular engagement creates a pool of available participants for point-in-time processes like the CFSP and CFSR (see example below). It’s important to note that, even during the CFSP and CFSR, ongoing engagement efforts for other agency projects and processes will continue.

Reaching Out to Stakeholders

Once agencies identify stakeholder 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:

- Court Improvement Program
- Private Provider Association
- Youth Advisory Board or Council
- Parent-Partner Program
- 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/participant.

For point-in-time processes like the CFSP and CFSR, child welfare agencies are encouraged to appoint an implementation team that includes diverse staff members to lead these processes on behalf of the agency

and in partnership with key stakeholders. This team would be responsible for engaging stakeholders in the process and incorporating their voices into the plan's goals, strategies, recommended interventions, and evaluation work. The agency staff members will identify key stakeholders to serve on the implementation team, reach out to them, and clearly communicate the team's function (Capacity Building Center for States, 2018).

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 recruiting family members, youth, and other stakeholders for participation in agency initiatives, agency staff should focus on the potential benefits of participation to the stakeholders. 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 stakeholder 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.

State Highlight

To help clarify the agency's vision and mission, one large jurisdiction initiated a broad-scale strategic planning process. The process engaged more than 3,000 internal and external stakeholders through a series of community-based forums. Thousands of employees and external partners were also given the opportunity to provide input through surveys that helped to identify priority child welfare initiatives and strategies. Teams synthesized the feedback provided by forum and survey participants to help inform the formulation of major organizational objectives. This inclusive approach to strategic planning helped to articulate a common set of values and goals across the department that were directly informed by families, caregivers, community stakeholders, and staff.

2. Level the Playing Field

To work effectively with diverse stakeholders, agencies need to "level the playing field," that is, develop partnerships based on equal participation and shared responsibilities. Agencies should not only ask stakeholders to provide feedback or comment on data or documents, but offer them real responsibilities and leadership roles, as appropriate. As such, the work of the team can be shared equally among its members, both agency staff and external stakeholders. Leveling the playing field also requires addressing barriers to participation that may exist among various stakeholder groups.

Families may be reluctant to provide feedback and participate in agency processes if their previous experiences with the child welfare system have not been positive or they feel that their voices are not valued. In fact, it is particularly important for agencies to try to engage families and youth who may have had a difficult relationship with the child welfare system. These folks have experiences and voices that—while not always positive—can help the agency understand why they have the challenges they do with people they are serving.

To successfully engage families and youth, agency staff need to work with them 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 stakeholders, planners should make it as easy as possible for external stakeholders, especially child welfare service recipients, to participate. Time and scheduling issues for all stakeholders can be addressed by being open about the level of effort required and leveraging technology for communication and meeting purposes. For example, some meetings can be held in the evenings to allow for work and school schedules. The agency can offer to cover transportation or other costs to stakeholders during the time they spend working on the project. Meetings could sometimes be held on electronic platforms (e.g., Skype) to encourage participation of those with irregular schedules or small children, or those who live or work too far away to travel to meetings regularly (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2010). If possible, a small stipend might be made available to some external stakeholders to cover a portion of the expenses associated with this work.

To make sure that the work is split up evenly among team members, agency teams should create workgroups to work on parts of ongoing processes such as strategic planning and CQI. Stakeholders can then be assigned to different roles on workgroups based on their interest, skill level, and time capacity so that their participation does not have to be a time- and labor-intensive endeavor (Center for States, 2018).

Agencies can work to establish trust by working with stakeholders as equal partners, 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 Court Improvement Program (CIP) Director, and they served on several committees together. While they shared their CFSP 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 stakeholders) 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 stakeholders. 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 stakeholder engagement on strategic planning, CQI, and other agency improvement teams works best when stakeholders (and all team participants) have clarity regarding the team's goals, scope, timeframe, roles, and deliverables. Understanding these foundational aspects of a project can help stakeholders 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 stakeholder engagement: a team mission statement, a team charter, and an open communication plan.

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

Team leaders should clarify roles and expectations with stakeholders and other team members early in the process. These topics and others (such as scope, timeframe, decision-making authority, and 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. The elements of a team charter can be found below.

Developing a comprehensive **open communication plan** is critical for all stakeholders to effectively work together. To remain fully engaged, all stakeholders 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 stakeholders as appropriate
- Clarifies internal and external communication protocols and identifies the person responsible for maintaining them
- Provides relevant information to all stakeholders (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)

Facilitate Effective Meetings

To facilitate stakeholder meetings that foster meaningful collaboration and mutual learning, it is important to train and support staff in becoming effective meeting facilitators. To further engage stakeholders, agencies might consider asking some stakeholders to serve as meeting cofacilitators where appropriate. Alternatively, stakeholders 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

Elements of a Team Charter

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

- Team mission
- Goals and objectives for the work of the 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 stakeholders about how their input influenced agency planning
- Roles and responsibilities
- Determination of how conflict will be managed

- 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 stakeholder meeting can be found in appendix A.

4. Make Sure Everyone Stays Informed

For stakeholders 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 stakeholders, agencies can provide them with an overview of the 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 (see example below) (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2010).

Agencies should keep stakeholders informed with concrete and digestible information. This can be done in the form a monthly email or newsletter, which provides stakeholders time to process the information before meeting with the agency, as well as an orientation meeting to discuss the information ahead of time. Stakeholders should also be provided with access to data collected by the agency. Relevant stakeholders

should be invited to meetings to discuss the data that concerns their area of interest, e.g., Youth Advisory Board representatives should be invited to discussions of data around service delivery to youth.

Regular communication with stakeholders working on strategic planning, assessment, or evaluation should address the following items throughout the CFSP process, as appropriate (Children’s Bureau, 2014b):

- Ongoing review of data and assessment of agency strengths and concerns
- Selection of priority areas for the CFSP and CFSR/PIP
- Identification of goals, objectives, target populations, and 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 stakeholders and ensuring they had all the information they needed for meaningful participation in the CFSP. For stakeholders to meaningfully participate on the CFSP team, they needed a clear understanding of the team’s mission, the problems the team would address, the team’s goals, what was expected of members, and how participation would occur. To meet this need, the state developed materials and a recording, made readily accessible via the web, that explain and define the CFSP and how stakeholders could contribute to the process. State representatives sent this information to their stakeholder team members before their participation so that they could learn about the process and its purpose.

5. Provide Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms

To improve stakeholder participation in a strategic planning process, agencies need to reach out to stakeholders throughout the year to give feedback regarding how the input they provided was used. Stakeholders should be regularly informed of the progress and outcome(s) of any process in which they have participated and next steps. This encourages stakeholders to continue to connect with the engagement process, builds trust, and strengthens relationships that were established during the process. Stakeholders also will have the opportunity to provide feedback regarding their participation and suggest areas for improvement.

The two-way communication plan and feedback loop that is created at the outset of any process should include strategies for continuing to communicate with external stakeholders once the formal part of the process ends. This may help keep the momentum going and will encourage stakeholders 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 stakeholders—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 stakeholder feedback so it can be properly considered, shared, and updated as the need arises.

Improvement initiatives in which stakeholders have participated should be regularly highlighted to stakeholders in communication. If stakeholders 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 Engaged Your Stakeholders ... Now What?

Once an agency has processes in place to engage stakeholders in both ongoing and point-in-time involvement, it's time to begin working with them as equal partners. This will work to infuse multiple stakeholder ideas and voices into activities such as strategic planning, setting priorities, conducting needs assessments, and evaluation. Some potential ways agencies might work with stakeholders in the context of federal planning, monitoring, and reporting processes include:

- Establishing a planning and implementation team comprised of a diverse group of key stakeholders to steer the system's strategic planning and reform efforts
- Assimilating data and evidence from the agency and its stakeholders (e.g., courts, tribes, service providers, etc.) and assessing the child welfare system's performance on the Child and Family Outcomes, Systemic Factors, and other key measures
- Drawing conclusions based on the aforementioned performance assessments, prioritizing the findings, and establishing the specific problems to be addressed in the improvement processes
- Engaging in deeper problem exploration to identify possible contributing factors, explore and validate potential root causes, and ultimately isolate the root causes to address through the reform effort (e.g., the 2020-24 CFSP)
- Establishing goals, objectives, strategies/interventions, and action steps for implementation (i.e., implementation plans) that align across planning and improvement processes
- Implementing and managing plans for improvement (e.g., from the Round 3 CFSR/PIP and/or the 2020-24 CFSP), including communicating the plans to stakeholders and supervising implementation to assess progress/improvements and make adjustments as necessary

Conclusion

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

Family engagement is particularly important to effective practice in child welfare, at both the case and system levels. Children, youth, parents, and kin should be engaged in all aspects of practice, 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, children, youth, and families must have an equal voice at the table in informing system improvement processes. Because they are the primary consumers of the child welfare services, they have unique experiences within the system that can be used to inform practice going forward. Not only does working with families and youth constitute best practice, but genuine family engagement is required by the Children's Bureau because it is essential to effective practice and reform.

The strategies, considerations, and tools presented here encourage states to consider new ways of implementing ongoing, regular stakeholder 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 stakeholder engagement.

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Appendix A: Sample Agenda for an Initial Meeting With Stakeholders

The following sample agenda can be used to begin planning an initial meeting with stakeholders 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, Y., Apt, B. S., & Walsh, C. M, 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 is 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 is 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.

Impartial and Objective

- ❑ 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.