

Capacity Building Center for States Podcast
HOW WE PARTNER WITH THE COMMUNITY TO IMPROVE SERVICE OPTIONS
3: Including Family, Youth, and Community Voice at the System Level
TRANSCRIPT

JESSICA BROWN [00:07]: We've really made a focus on bringing them to the table, not to just garner buy-in and give them a product for them to review, but really soliciting their participation in co-creating what we're doing.

NARRATOR [00:20]: That was Jessica Brown from the Kentucky Department of Community-Based Services talking about what it means to really bring different voices to the table as they transform their child welfare system. You'll hear more from her later in this episode of "How We Partner With the Community to Improve Service Options". I'm Betsy Lerner, and in this podcast series, we're talking with child welfare agencies and their community partners who are working to develop a service array that's responsive to families and youth, and asking the question, what strategies are helping them change their organizational culture to support putting families at the center of their work? Take a listen to episode three.

[01:00]: [Music introduction]

NARRATOR [01:06]: In the previous episode, you heard about how child welfare agencies in Kentucky and DC approach establishing partnerships to serve the needs of families in their communities. But how do they keep up with the changing needs of families?

[01:20]: I wanted to learn more about how agencies stay abreast of these concerns and the makeup of the groups they source for feedback. I talked with Eric Clark, the commissioner for the Department for Community-Based Services in Kentucky, about how his agency reaches out to stakeholders.

[01:41]: [Muted sounds of conversation between interviewer and others in the room, asking "Are we ready? Okay..."]

ERIC CLARK [01:46]: When we rolled out our child welfare transformation initiative, we created a stakeholder engagement committee, which consists of youth advocates, foster parents, legislators, representatives from the courts, private providers. We're a semi-privatized child welfare system in Kentucky, so we brought along some of our key providers to--again, it's hearing that voice. It's hearing what's important to them. What issues need to be addressed? And developing ways and opportunities to collaborate with them and ways to address them.

[02:26]: One of the things I will say, that led to our three transformational goals that I just shared, is those are certainly data-informed goals. We can track that over time and gauge how well we're doing or not. But the strategies on how to address those goals is wide open. And that's where they come into play. What strategy would they put forward that we can consider in addressing children entering and exiting care which would ultimately reduce caseload? And all these things feed off each other.

[03:02]: In 2019, this past year, we had a legislative proposal, House Bill 158, that incorporated and codified a foster youth bill of rights. And that was to demonstrate how we are approaching our work in

Kentucky. We know that no voice is more powerful than those who have been impacted by something. So, we can have the best, brightest, smartest people sitting in the capital city, figuring out policies, statutes, and regulations to put on the books. But if we're not incorporating the voices who have been impacted by these things the most, it's all for naught, as far as I'm concerned.

[03:48]: So we brought foster youth forward to be the face of a foster youth bill of rights. And foster parents in Kentucky have had a statutorily codified bill of rights on the books in Kentucky for decades. This gives foster youth the same level of legal standing as foster parents. And there's no surprises in their bill of rights. This has been embedded in our practice within the Department for Community-Based Services for years. But it's just giving some recognition in a way that they could come forward and advocate for themselves.

NARRATOR [04:34]: The Commissioner's perspective was insightful, but I also wanted to hear from the foster youth he spoke of to better understand how they influence policy and decision making. I'd heard about the advocacy group in Kentucky called the Voices of the Commonwealth. This diverse group of youth aged 16 to 23 years old communicate the needs and issues of youth in foster care and those who have aged out of the system to the Department for Community Based Services staff, community partners, resource parents, and others.

JOSHUA DEGNAN [05:03]: My name is Joshua Degnan. I am the president of the Voices of the Commonwealth.

[05:07]: We worked alongside with the commissioner on House Bill 158. And there was a foster youth bill of rights that was in that. So, we went, and we spoke heavily with the legislators. We had one-on-one meetings with them, and we talked to them about why we support it and gave a little bit of our story. And also, the Voice of the Commonwealth, when both the Senate and the House had their committee meetings reviewing the house bill, and specifically talking about the foster youth bill of rights, we would have representatives there showing why different key parts of it could have changed our lives and had a more positive outcome, more positive impact.

[05:39]: The Voices of the Commonwealth, it's a great initiative that we started. It's comprised of youth who either are or were in foster care. And it's a youth leadership council. And we work on a number of different bases. We work to change policy and procedure, and we work with the legislature, trying to make things better for youth in care, as well as we do an educational piece with caseworkers, with foster youth, and foster parents, just trying to educate them better on some of the experiences that youth go through and different things that can be changed through the foster care program and through all the services that are provided, to try and make life better, ultimately, for youth who are in care and their families.

[06:13]: The youth that we have, they come from all different walks of life. We have youth that have been adopted. We have youth that have aged out. We have some youth that are still in care, that can go and share stories of what's happening to them right now.

[06:21]: I believe that right now, there's so many people in so many different strategically placed positions throughout the agency, that they just have a true passion and a true heart. I mean, all the way from the top to the bottom, everybody that we meet, they truly just have that passion for making the lives of youth better. There's a lot of people who are here to make a lot of change, and things of that nature.

[06:40]: And the amount of invites that we've gotten, the amount of involvement they've tried to initiate with us, it just really shows that they're bringing us in and trying to make sure that we can tell them, from our experience and our past, what the best courses are to achieve some of their goals. So, seeing how heavily they've involved us, even with me being out of foster care, just being able to share my stories from when I was in care, we're telling them that youth need to be more involved.

[07:05]: It doesn't just take youth who were in foster care. Everybody should care. As Commissioner Clark says all the time, everybody should care about our youth. Everybody should care about that. Because they're the ones that are going to be moving on. They're going to become adults. They are going to become parts of, members, of society. So, they are the future. So, everybody should be involved with the positive changes and the lives of our youth.

[07:26]: A lot of things that they're working on right now that excite me a lot is creating a sense of normalcy for youth that are in foster care. There is such a stigma that, if you were in foster care, you were a bad kid. Or this must be wrong with you, or you came from a terrible family, things like that. There's a lot of work to develop a sense of normalcy.

[07:42]: One policy that I've seen come from the agency that helped work towards that was letting youth be able to have a little more freedom that people are able to see. When I went through foster care, there was a very specific list of people I could have contact with, and that was it. I mean, there was about five people, I think, that were on my list, that I was allowed to have contact with while I was in care. So, it was very hard to have any sort of normal relationships with anybody.

[08:03]: You have youth that are going out to schools. They're making friends. But they used to have to do background checks and things of that nature, just to be able to go overnight and stay at a friend's house. There was a lot of work that went into it, and they're working really hard in the agency right now to make that a little more normalized, make it a little easier, so that--any other youth, any other child, that's not in foster care, would be able to have those opportunities to go out and go and be with friends and spend time with them and communicate with them and go do sleepovers. And they're working a lot to update and change policies to make that easier.

NARRATOR [08:33]: To learn more about the Department of Community Based Services' newfound efforts, I reached out to Jessica Brown, one of the agency's executive advisors.

[08:44]: [Muted sounds of chatter between interviewer and others in the room, sound tech talking about turning off phone]

JESSICA BROWN [08:53]: Well, as you well know, we've been undergoing a child welfare transformation for the past year or so. So that was a great opportunity to really say what is the system that we want to have here in Kentucky? Let's put everything on the table. Nothing is off limits. All voices are important. All ideas live. And part of that structuring was really making sure we had the right people at the table, and saying this isn't just child welfare, or the child welfare agency. It's really looking at our consumer voices, our youth, our parents. It's also looking at what is the voice of public health in this and behavioral health and realizing that if we don't bring everyone to the table, we can't possibly serve in the way that we really want our vision to accomplish.

[09:38]: So we've made an intentional effort to really have voices at the table from consumers or those with lived experiences. So, youth, parents, relatives. And I think really giving the message to the community and to those consumers that it would be rather arrogant of us as a child welfare agency to surmise that we have all of the answers, and that really in order to build this system and to accomplish our vision, we have to say families know what is best for them. And what are they seeing? What are their experiences they're having? And really take down the guards of, perhaps, defense, and really allow some transparency and some honest conversations.

[10:20]: To me, some of the most fruitful and productive discussions have been a biological parent sitting at a table with us and saying that's not good enough. And saying, are you really making diligent efforts to engage and allow participation of parents at times that are convenient for them? And how could they be better involved in these decisions that are impacting them? And that is important for our system to hear.

NARRATOR [10:45]: Agency collaborators in the nation's capital like Sharafdeen Ibraheem, deputy director at the East River Family Strengthening Collaborative, also stress the need for getting input from those with firsthand experience. I sat down with Sharafdeen to get his take.

SHARAFDEEN IBRAHEEM [11:08]: We need to really be connected to the community and the residents. We need to hear from them on a regular basis. We need to know what is working, what's not working because they inform, truly, how we should serve the community often.

[11:21]: So on the community level, we try to have community events. We have community conversations, focus groups. We do a lot of community engagement and outreach. And then we take that to our funders level and our stakeholders' level. So, our boards, they tend to also have influence and they give input and feedback on things that they think we should prioritize in our respective organizations. I can't speak for the other ones, but I know it's similar. They have similar input in terms of how to shape and construct the organizations.

[11:51]: And then on our leadership level, with executive director Miss Best and her contemporaries, we go to city council, we go to our funders, we advocate. We really try to speak to our ANC commissioners, our ambassadors, our champions in the community. But I think it really is a multilayer approach we take. We don't necessarily use just one methodology; we use a combination of strategies to really make sure that we are being responsible with our work in the community.

NARRATOR [12:27]: Bringing various affected voices to the table is essential for improving the child welfare system in your state. You've heard how in Kentucky, a committee of stakeholders sit at the table together with child welfare agency staff to find transformational strategies that will help the system meet their goals. In DC, the collaboratives regularly engage and listen to the community to assess their needs so the system can make adjustments. When your agency can hear about the issues that need to be addressed from those that can help you solve them *and* those that are dealing with them, change is more likely to occur.

[13:09]: Thanks for listening to the third episode of the podcast series How We Partner With the Community to Improve Service Options. I hope it's left you inspired and sparked ideas that you can put into practice at your agency.

[13:22]: Listen on for a brief snippet from the next episode: Shifting to a Family-Focused Organizational Culture. Until next time.

ERIN SNEED [13:32]: So why was that decision made on the child welfare end. And then maybe why was that level of care decision made or why was that treatment decision made? We've really worked on developing those relationships to be able to have those difficult discussions so that we can truly understand each other's systems and understand why decisions would be made the way that they are.

Narrator [13:52]: This podcast was created by the Capacity Building Center for States funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau under contract number HHSP233201400033C.