



## RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

### Listening Sessions

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In many of the communities whose children experience disproportionate representation and disparate outcomes in the child welfare system, there exists deep trauma, pain, and grief as a result of the historical impact of racism, relocation and land loss, laws prohibiting traditional ceremonies and healing rituals, and other experiences that separated family members from each other and from their people, culture, and way of life. Our public institutions continue to be affected by this history of discrimination, marginalization, and oppression, perpetuating bias and assumptions in policy, practice, and system functioning despite well-intentioned staff and leaders.

*We need to lift up opportunities to give voice to cultural and community experts... We believe we are the experts, yet we often never hear from those that are.*

*- County CWS Social Worker*

To effectively build community partnerships in this context, the child welfare agency and its leaders in implementing jurisdictions worked to understand and be responsive to the historical trauma and experiences of the communities and Tribes whose families and children were being served. This opened the eyes of the agency and its leaders to new ways of doing business and to how to support staff in culturally responsive, trauma-informed work with children, families, communities, and Tribes. As an example, behavior by a family, community, or Tribe that the system has labeled “resistant”, “angry”, or “secretive”, such as hiding a child or sending a child out the back door as a child welfare representative knocks on the front door, when viewed through a lens that is sensitive to historical trauma, becomes recognized as a coping mechanism to protect against additional trauma by the government and its representatives. This culturally relevant, trauma-informed understanding of children and families then has impacts for practitioner training and coaching content and processes and may have implications for agency policies, protocols, and provider contracts associated with parent/child visitation and other agency interactions with children and families.

Learning about the experiences of families, communities, and Tribes and building AICPs require substantial listening and humility to “reset” the relationship with community. This means humbly accepting that to serve communities and Tribes without understanding them is disrespectful, ineffective, and ultimately harmful. Some implementing jurisdictions have coined the term “listening sessions” to describe early relationship-building engagements with communities and Tribes; however, the term used or the form taken will be as diverse as the communities and Tribes being engaged. What is important is to ask the community or Tribal leader about the best ways of learning about the lived experiences of their community or Tribe and about how the child welfare system has impacted their children and families and then to proceed in the way recommended by the community. Whatever form is suggested for this learning, the agency should be prepared to host a number of these sessions as there will be unique history and experiences for each community or Tribe being engaged. Here are other helpful tips for planning listening-type sessions with the community:

- Ask partners how to create a safe space for their testimony.
- Host with food and refreshments, whenever possible.
- Work with partners to plan opening words, such as a song or blessing, which is traditional or culturally meaningful for the community.

- Use the community's words in notes and documentation and make their words visible on your flip charts. When providing notes back to partners, use their words rather than rewriting it to make it sound better in your eyes.

Here is an example of how powerful and constructive early listening sessions were for a jurisdiction developing active involved community partnerships with Tribes in its region.

*Listening sessions had a significant impact on local leaders, who came to understand the incredible trauma and loss that past experiences brought to local children, families, and Tribal communities. As a result, agency and Tribal community partners identified a need for cultural training for children's services staff to help them better understand the histories, culture, and needs of the children and families being served. This resulted in a 3-day cultural immersion training designed and conducted by Tribal partners.*

*The training addresses life from the local (and somewhat national) cultural perspective. Participants experience how the layers of trauma (historical, institutional, and event based) that have been experienced and continue to be experienced affect the coping and daily functioning of Native families and communities. It lifts up how local Native culture is rich in supports that help create balance and wellness in daily living.*

*The training is given every 6 months by Tribal partners as part of local practice model implementation and is required for all staff.*

## Shared Goals and Outcomes

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Another important aspect of relationship-building is bringing community and system partners to the table with key agency leaders and staff to explore data and to develop a shared understanding of terminology, a clear problem statement to guide partnership work, and joint goals and outcomes for the partnership. While it may seem that data regarding disproportionate representation and disparate outcomes speak for themselves, much of the available data use federal measures related to safety, permanency, and well-being that are inconsistent with cultural and community values, traditions, and norms. For instance, permanency outcome measures are based on placement stability and reunification or adoption by a particular family; yet Tribal values and customs define "family" in the context of the Tribe and Tribal relations, and there are often traditions in which children live with various relations at different points in time to support learning, development, health, well-being, and spirituality.

In reviewing agency data relating to disproportionate representation and disparate outcomes with community partners, child welfare agencies can surface and explore cultural perspectives so alternative interpretations of the data are considered that take into account the community's values and way of life. These conversations develop shared understanding of terms such as safety, permanency, and well-being so they become meaningful and culturally relevant for both agency and community partners. Exploring the data and implications with community partners sets the stage for shared problem solving. Facilitation of group discussion of what partners can do together to improve outcomes and to reduce disproportionate representation and disparate outcomes for the community or Tribes' children is important. Creating a concise problem statement meaningful to both agency and community partners that conveys the issue(s) that partners are coming together to address is also helpful.

A sample problem statement is included below. This is a generalized version of the problem statement that the Child and Family Practice Model was developed to address. Agency and community partners can consider whether to adopt or adapt this problem statement or develop a problem statement that better meets local needs, issues, and context.

*Note: The blank space in the sample problem statement below would be filled in with the target population(s) identified in local data mining and analysis. The term “child welfare system” refers to the child welfare agency and the partners with which that system currently works to serve its clients, including the courts, mental health, probation, education, private providers, etc.*

### **SAMPLE PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The child welfare system and the practice it supports with children and families:

- Does not adequately understand, engage, and value the strengths and resources of \_\_\_\_\_ families and communities due to mutual mistrust and a lack of understanding of the lived experiences of these communities and how the child welfare system has impacted their children and families and
- Has not consistently partnered with \_\_\_\_\_ families and communities to address the underlying grief, trauma, and loss their children and families are more likely to experience in their lives and to identify, develop, fund, and make available culturally based and trauma-informed support services.