

Lessons Learned Regarding REI Efforts

Four Major Factors Facilitating REI Success

- 1) **Having the commitment and buy-in of leaders throughout the organization and those on the front-line** (top leadership vision and commitment, buy-in from leadership throughout the organization, buy-in and commitment from line staff as a result of early engagement and clear and transparent communication from leadership about why the initiative is essential and important, appointing a dedicated project manager to drive the initiative, a sense of urgency among the workforce).

Jaya John tells a story that illustrates this point well. A desert's soil can be hard and dry. With heavy rain falls, the water will just run off and never penetrate the land. But if we "soften the soil" – and provide water/rain a little bit at a time, then, the soil can absorb the moisture and plants will thrive`

- 2) **Being data driven, monitoring and communicating success** (conducting a thorough needs assessment, looking at data in new and different ways, focus on data and continually examining data using a CQI process to determine if strategies were having an impact, being transparent with partners and community members about what the data revealed, making changes that led to immediate success)
- 3) **Investing in efforts to develop leadership and staff** (building leadership skills and focusing on leadership values, attitudes and behaviors, developing the workforce, creating a culture of safety, in general, and for courageous conversations to occur within the agency, in particular)
- 4) **Partnering with other entities** (bringing tribes and leaders in the African American communities to the table for true partnership to elevate the voice of those with lived experience, utilizing partnerships with Regional Training Academies, partnering with CBOs to modify approaches and service delivery for BIPOC families, youth and young adults, leveraging funding to support new practices like differential response (DR), team decision making (TDM), and Parent Partners, receipt of grant funding to support change efforts)

Three Major Barriers to REI Success

- 1) **Lacking the commitment and buy-in of leaders and the workforce** (conducting the work in a difficult context: More conservative or right-leaning counties produced many staff who carried those attitudes into the child welfare workplace leading to the expression of sentiments that "we don't need this" and a lack of embracing of change; lack of staff and leadership diversity; lack of getting the workforce ready for the change effort, why REI is important, and how REI will benefit everyone working in the agency as well as the families, youth and young adults served; sometimes a focus on one particular racial or ethnic group led to resistance. For example, Latinx staff in some counties were resentful that efforts were singularly focused on African American or Tribal groups, since there were perceived needs in the Latinx community as well. This type of focus on only one group to the exclusion of other high need groups can also be used as a tool by some unsupportive white staff for stirring dissent between BIPOC groups; the presence of strong

unions can slow progress and uptake of new practices; workforce skepticism and lack of commitment, needing to attend to changing attitudes, beliefs, and biases as part of culture change).

- 2) **Lack of organizational readiness and capacity** (difficulty having courageous conversations without first building a foundation of trust and openness; staff turnover- makes it difficult to build a competent and confident workforce and taxes training resources; staff layoffs; stretching of all types of resources including staffing which sometimes led to exhaustion; changes in job duties, for example in one county the ER function changed without enough conversation with ER staff; technical barriers in some data tracking systems; lack of integration of knowledge gained about race equity issues into policies, practices and behaviors; duplication of efforts; sustaining the effort).
- 3) **Challenges in partnerships** (Each tribe is different and when working with multiple tribes in the same county that sometimes slowed down the process while the agency attended to the needs, desires and cultures of each one; lack of trust and positive relationships with tribes, African American communities and Latinx communities slowed progress. A 200-year history of mistrust had been built that had to be worked through. Sometimes this history was re-experienced as data about tribes was published; sometimes community partners banded together against the child welfare agency in these efforts which made teaming and partnership a challenge; lack of funding flexibility).

REI Impact

- 1) **Overall outcomes were positively impacted-** Most respondents thought that disproportionality and disparity numbers either did not get worse or improved due to the efforts on the REI initiative.
- 2) **Particular strategies seemed to work well-** There was a belief that differential response, SDM, TDM/CFTs, Parent to Parent, Youth Partner, Kin Partners, Cultural Brokers, Family Finding all make a difference.
- 3) **There were positive workforce outcomes-** There was an increase in diversity in the workforce and leadership in many counties.
- 4) **Changes in most counties were short-lived-** These changes were largely short-lived, although a few counties showed sustained changes.

Most counties sustained REI programs. Conditions that supported sustainability

- 1) **Leadership development of champions throughout the agency matters-** In counties where committed leaders nurtured the development and leadership skills of champions throughout the organization, and where staff rose to the CW director role from within the agency, sometimes as part of deliberate succession planning, the REI initiatives continued and/or grew

in scope. In many of these counties the new leaders were BIPOC which intensified commitment to REI.

- 2) **Best if REI doesn't solely fall on the shoulders of BIPOC leaders and staff-** Counties where both BIPOC and white staff and leaders were committed to REI work and not just relying on BIPOC staff to carry the entire load was vital for sustainability and to reduce burnout of BIPOC staff.
- 3) **Early engagement of unions and the workforce helped in sustaining efforts-** In some counties the programs continued due to careful negotiations with the unions early on.
- 4) **Embedding REI strategies deep in the organization was key-** Counties that embedded REI strategies, structures, and programs into policy, training, and IT data collection systems tended to have more sustainability of more of the strategies than those that did not.
- 5) **California legislators did their part-** Legislation in California helped to move some of the direct and indirect REI strategies along such as Katie A, CCR, and CAN.
- 6) **Grounding the work in practice models helped-** Both CAPP and the CPM were noted as practice frameworks that embedded REI into the DNA of practice and supported ongoing focus on cultural humility, family voice, family engagement, teaming, advocating and partnership with BIPOC communities.
- 7) **Attending to general and specific aspects of organizational culture and climate facilitated sustainability-** Counties that attended to organizational culture and climate seemed to see more sustainability of REI efforts.
- 8) **Careful planning, staging and persistence was key-** Some counties noted that starting small to not overwhelm staff is a good starting place, then building on that first initiative through pursuit of additional funding, grants or technical assistance can help to sustain efforts. But, they also noted that attending to issues of systemic racism in the child welfare system must be continual and ongoing. As one interviewee said, *"This work is never done."*