

# Meaningful Engagement with Family Leaders for Systems Change

**The first step of meaningful engagement is to examine your readiness.**

Are you prepared to partner with families? Is your system or agency ready to partner with families? Reflect on these questions from an individual lens, and from the perspective of your agency / system:

- ✓ Do you see families in a strength-based manner?
- ✓ Can you identify why it is important to have a person with lived experience on your team?
- ✓ Do you want honest feedback? Are you ready to hear where your system or service can improve?
- ✓ Will you hear a family member's observations and recommendations as complaining or nay saying and be threatened by it? Or, will you take their perspective as constructive feedback that is necessary to gauge system performance?

**Frequently asked questions about involving family leaders in systems change:**

- *Do family leaders know enough about our system to give good input on how to fix it?*

Families may not have all the knowledge about the inner workings of different systems, but they can be given information that will help them understand the way your system works. Think about how you onboard new employees with an orientation process- a binder of information that may include organizational charts, policies and procedures, information on initiatives. How do you involve other stakeholders? What types of information are they given and how much of that same information can be used to educate family leaders?

- *Will families just want to talk about how the system failed them?*

Some families are in a space where they can only focus on their family's emergent needs. These families would not be a good fit for systems change work. There are families who are able to see the bigger picture beyond their experiences and their input is invaluable for systems to learn how to best serve others. You can get a good sense of a person's strengths by using a vetting process that will help you determine if a person is able to see beyond their own circumstances and whether they will be a solution-oriented problem solver that can help inform your work.

➤ *What will we need to support family leaders?*

**Financial Equity:** Community members provide expert consultation. We would never think of asking an independent consultant to just show up for our meetings. There's an understanding that we pay for expertise. People with lived experiences are experts on their life experiences, family situation, and interactions with services and systems. Often times family leaders would be unable to come to our meetings and provide us with feedback without receiving financial support.

**Mentorship:** Mentor programs work great as a teaching and capacity building tool because they provide encouragement and guidance to family leaders that participate in discussions and meetings. Mentors can review agendas and materials with family leaders before a meeting to prepare the leader and answer any questions they may have. They can also provide support during a meeting by sitting with the family leader to offer information or clarification during the meeting. Additionally, mentors can debrief with the family leader after the meeting to help them process the information that was given.

**Clarity:** Be clear with all aspects of the work. Define what you are working on, describe the project, and give a brief history. Articulate what role family leaders fill within your project. Logistical details are critical, including clarity on where will the meetings be held and what the time commitment would be.

➤ *How does my organization or system prepare for family leaders?*

When bringing families with lived experience to decision making tables, it is important to actively prepare existing members, as some people may be uncomfortable with this change. It is important to honor those feelings of discomfort and work towards a fact-based understanding of the family leader's role in the work. Depending on the nature of your work, another potential concern may be related to stigma of working with someone who has accessed services. Whatever the concerns are, encourage existing members to share concerns and honor the concerns that are shared. Talk about the important contributions of family leaders and clarify the roles of all participants.

➤ *Should we wait until our organization/system is fully ready to bring in family leaders?*

“We have to get our house in order before we can bring anyone else in.” This is a common statement. In reality, your ‘house’ may never be enough in order to bring someone from the outside onto the team. Family leaders understand that often when you're making changes, things have to get messy in order for change to occur. Quite often it is their outside perspective that helps the change come together more smoothly, and quickly, while pointing the work in the right direction.