

Engaging Young People With Lived Experience in the Child and Family Services Reviews: Key Considerations, Roles, and Recommendations



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Introduction

One of the ways in which the Children’s Bureau (CB) helps states achieve positive outcomes for children and families is by monitoring state child welfare services through the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs). The CFSR process¹ is designed to strengthen state child welfare programs and improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and families served. The CFSRs bring people together who can make a difference in the state child welfare system (e.g., child welfare agency staff, members of the state’s legal and judicial communities, community partners, and parents and young people with lived experience). Young people with lived child welfare experience are an important stakeholder group when conducting the CFSRs. Integrating the voice of young people in all aspects of child welfare decision-making is a strengths-based approach that increases ongoing engagement and empowers young people. Young people with lived experience often understand how the system works (or doesn’t work) and have ideas about how to improve it because they have experienced the child welfare system first-hand. It also further recognizes that young people are the experts on their circumstances and are the individuals most knowledgeable about solutions that will benefit them.²

A critical step toward engaging young people in the CFSRs is to ask them how they want to be involved. Through a series of focus groups, 18 young people with self-identified lived child welfare experience were asked about the best methods of recruiting, engaging, supporting, and retaining young people in all aspects of the CFSRs. This brief is based on the results of the focus groups and discusses key considerations, roles, and recommendations for states when engaging young people in the CFSRs.

¹ For more information about the CFSRs, see the Children’s Bureau Child and Family Services Reviews website at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/monitoring/child-family-services-reviews>.

² Engaging, empowering, and utilizing family and youth voice in all aspects of child welfare to drive case planning and system improvement. Children’s Bureau, IM-19-03. (Aug. 1, 2019).



Key Considerations

Key considerations for states when engaging young people in the CFSRs include:

Intentionality, Authenticity, and Equal Partnership

- There are young people who want to be involved in all aspects of the CFSRs. It is important to be intentional by asking young people which roles they are most interested in.
- Authentic engagement includes building connections that are genuine and centered around trust. Young people desire to be authentically engaged through employment opportunities that offer key roles and compensation.
- To achieve equal partnership, young people need adequate training, resources, and support.

Early and Ongoing Engagement Opportunities

- Outreach and engagement efforts should start while young people are still in care.
- Ongoing engagement can be accomplished by incorporating the voices of young people at the beginning of the CFSRs and continuously through each stage of the process (not only for final feedback).
- Modern technology methods, such as social media, email, and texting, should be used to keep in touch with young people and increase their engagement.
- Sharing results and products to update young people on changes and improvements being made based on the feedback they provided helps young people feel like their voices matter.

“Recruiting young people for one-time things [engagement opportunities] is great. But I think maintaining the relationship with youth throughout, not even just throughout a particular project, but throughout the duration of the whole time it takes to improve the child welfare system...can be a benefit to the states.”

—Focus group participant/lived experience expert

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- Creating young-people-friendly opportunities and materials is critical for successfully engaging diverse young people in an inclusive and equitable manner.
- Outreach and engagement strategies need to be diverse and inclusive (e.g., using technology as a mechanism for outreach and engagement can provide young people with more equitable access to CFSR opportunities).
- Reaching out to young people who are less often engaged by going to where they are can let them know their voice is valued and can provide more inclusive and diverse perspectives on the CFSRs (e.g., if a state is trying to engage young people in care, they may need to consider visiting various types of out-of-home placements such as foster homes, group homes, rural areas, Supervised Independent Living placements, and detention facilities).



“I think if we want to engage with communities, especially underserved communities, we need to go into their spaces. [Find] meetings that currently exist within their communities that perhaps they would welcome us into [in order] to have these conversations.”

—Focus group participant/lived experience expert

Young people might be interested in being involved in the CFSRs because:

- They want to give back to young people in care by providing their expertise.
- Involvement in the CFSRs offers a collaborative way to make improvements to the child welfare system.

Conversations with young people about getting involved in the CFSRs should:

- Be educational and provide sufficient information about the CFSRs using young-people-friendly language and materials;
- Include information about how states will follow up with young people to provide them with the results from their participation; and
- Be led by young people.

Roles for Young People in the Statewide Assessment and Statewide Data Indicators

The statewide assessment process provides an opportunity for states to gather and analyze information to determine how the state is doing in meeting outcomes and systemic factor requirements. The process begins with the consideration of a state’s performance on the Statewide Data Indicators (SWDI). Young people could help complete the Statewide Assessment interpret the data and evidence, and disseminate results. Roles states could consider for young people as part of the state’s CFSR team working on the statewide assessment process include:

- Helping to gather data and evidence (e.g., from young people in care)
- Providing input on systemic factor functioning (especially Agency Responsiveness to the Community, Service Array and Resource Development, Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment, and Retention, and Quality Assurance System)
- Partnering with young people in care to help them better understand the CFSR process through peer networks and peer-led trainings and to begin identifying themes and potential strategies for improvement
- Designing more engaging visuals to present data using language for the general population (e.g., including simpler and more engaging visualization techniques such as charts, graphs, and colors and highlighting the most important takeaways)
- Reviewing data from the Statewide Assessment and SWDI and presenting it to state or federal leadership

- Developing engaging, shorter briefs/summaries of information from the Statewide Assessment for non-technical audiences (e.g., people with lived experience)
- Developing statewide assessment and SWDI materials and resources, and helping create and write reports and data visualizations (e.g., young people could help ensure the data and evidence reflect child welfare experiences and that reports and data visualizations are young-people-friendly)

The Statewide Assessment is a product that young people want to better understand and help develop. Welcoming and accommodating young people's lived expertise could lead to more representative products and stronger practices, which are key facilitators to achieving better outcomes for children, youth, and families.

Roles for Young People in the Onsite Review

During the onsite review, a team of people from the CB, child welfare agency staff, and other system partners review the practices within a state to look at how the system is working. Roles states could consider for young people as part of the state's CF SR team include:

- Helping to develop training materials that are young-people-friendly and young-people-sensitive to prepare participants for both case-related and stakeholder interviews
- Preparing others (particularly young people in care) before their involvement in the onsite review
- Providing training to interviewers on how to speak to young people in care regarding their experiences
- Providing feedback on ways to improve the onsite review process, language used, and presentation of data

Specifically, during the case review/case-related interviews, young people could:

- Support states with the recruitment of children, youth, parents, foster parents, and caseworkers for case-related interviews
- Support states with scheduling case-related interviews
- Help reviewers better understand the information collected from case record reviews and interviews
- Support other young people in care during interviews and assist them with understanding questions and prompts



“I like the idea of having a young person with lived expertise co-facilitate case-related interviews with young people. I think having that ally presence in the room for those interviews could be very empowering for both parties.”

—Focus group participant/lived experience expert

Specifically, during the stakeholder interviews, young people could:

- Support states with the recruitment of children, youth, parents, foster parents, and caseworkers for stakeholder interviews
- Support states with outreach to populations who are marginalized to provide more diverse voices and feedback

- Support states with scheduling stakeholder interviews
- Take notes during stakeholder interviews
- Facilitate or co-facilitate stakeholder interviews

The onsite review includes significant stakeholder interaction. Giving young people key and visible roles will help young people in care who take part in the CFSR trust the review process more. Young people also bring expertise on how best to involve and engage other young people, particularly those in care, during the onsite review.

Engaging young people in care in the onsite review is an opportunity to authentically capture diverse voices from within the child welfare system via case reviews, case-related interviews, and stakeholder interviews. Preparing young people in care for the onsite review will help them feel more comfortable and confident about their participation. A sense of preparedness will allow young people to feel safer when answering questions, which ultimately can provide reviewers with more informed and representative data.

Roles for Young People in Program Improvement Plan Development and Monitoring

After reviewing all the information received, the CB determines how well the state is meeting the needs of children and families. If necessary, the CB requires states to develop a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to address areas needing improvement. Throughout PIP development and monitoring, roles states could consider for young people as part of the state's CFSR team include:

PIP Development

- Reviewing data and identifying themes
- Identifying where states can make improvements and developing PIP goals, strategies and/or interventions
- Joining a PIP work group/council

PIP Monitoring

- Gathering information from young people in care about what is and is not working well (e.g., young people could have regular check-ins with young people in care to talk about progress)
- Working with the state to monitor goal progress and determine whether the strategies and activities are making a positive difference for families involved in child welfare services
- Identifying challenges and/or facilitators
- Reviewing/tracking what is working well in each county and using that information to improve outcomes across the state



“I think it would really be helpful to have multiple people with lived expertise [as] part of [the] monitoring group [from] start to finish. A long-term commitment here would provide more valuable insight, and more than two [young people] with lived experience because everyone has a different lens and experience!”

—Focus group participant/lived experience expert

PIP development and monitoring are unique opportunities for ongoing engagement because they are longer processes and there are multiple areas for young people to be involved. Young people can bring unique perspectives as they are often connected to timely, modern, and evidence-based materials. Young people can identify positive outcomes and challenges through a different lens. Lastly, young people may see more quickly than other stakeholders whether changes are making a difference.

Recommendations

Recommendations for states to help engage young people in the CFSTRs include but are not limited to:

Create state-level roles for young people

- Establish ongoing CFSTR leadership roles and employment opportunities (e.g., state staff or consultant positions as case reviewers, CFSTR ambassadors, entry-level positions for young people no longer in care) to promote engagement and retention.
- Create young-people-centered CFSTR councils/workgroups/committees.
- Provide opportunities for young people to speak about the CFSTRs (e.g., at conferences and trainings).

Conduct ongoing outreach and recruitment

- Provide young-people-friendly information about the CFSTRs (e.g., videos, infographics, fact sheets), including why the participation of young people is important.
 - Have young people in state-level roles help inform and engage others, especially young people, about the CFSTRs.
- Advertise CFSTR opportunities in places where young people are (e.g., schools/universities, barber shops and salons, homeless shelters, community

organizations, national organizations) to engage diverse young people.

- Use technology to advertise CFSTR opportunities and provide CFSTR updates in multiple ways (e.g., social media, calls, texts, emails, newsletters).
- Partner with those who have relationships with young people (e.g., national volunteer organizations, state youth councils) to engage young people in the CFSTRs.
- Inform young people about CFSTR opportunities available to them while they are still in care and create a system for contacting them once they are no longer in care (e.g., email sign-up).



“I would definitely say the young people are geared to make other young people interested in this topic [CFSTRs] more than the best trained professionals could ever do...”

—Focus group participant/lived experience expert

Engage more than one young person

- Include multiple young people in CFSTR opportunities to prevent tokenization.
- Create opportunities for young people to build a sense of community and peer-to-peer connections.
- Use peer networks to recruit, train, and retain young people in the CFSTRs.

Allow young people to choose their role(s)

- Educate young people about different CFSR opportunities and allow them to choose what interests them.

Appropriately compensate young people

- Establish compensation before starting an opportunity.
 - Compensation for time and participation should be via cash, direct deposit, or mobile payment apps as these methods allow flexibility in the way funds can be used. Additional mechanisms to compensate young people include letters of recommendation, community service hours, and language to use for their resumes and profiles (e.g., LinkedIn).

Prepare, support, and train young people

- Provide clear expectations to help young people understand the purpose of their involvement in the CFSRs and how their lived experience matters.
- Provide hands-on preparation before a CFSR opportunity.
 - Consider having mentoring/shadowing opportunities for young people before participating.
- Create a safe and supportive environment.
 - Have check-ins before, during, and after CFSR opportunities and hold debriefs.
 - Provide mental health support or have supportive staff on site (e.g., counselors, youth advisory boards/council advisors).
 - Provide breaks.
 - Teach and practice strategic sharing techniques.

- Create a series of CFSR trainings beginning with a young-people-friendly description of the CFSRs and their impact on the child welfare system, followed by more specific trainings or capacity-building sessions so young people are fully prepared to participate in any phase of the CFSR.

Provide multiple ways for young people to give input on the CFSRs

- Gather feedback using diverse methods, including:
 - Focus groups
 - Surveys
 - Phone calls
 - Web-based/virtual meetings (including allowing the use of a chat feature)
 - Round-robin-style talks
 - Feedback walls/talking walls



“First and foremost, education [should be] front loaded....We need to have sufficient training for our young people, and that needs to be more than just watching a video.”

—Focus group participant/lived experience expert



“Having multiple ways to collect feedback is important to make it more young people friendly. It can be really intimidating to share thoughts in a verbal-only format.”

—Focus group participant/lived experience expert

“Prepare to gather feedback from youth in very different ways. Some people do like to speak out loud and provide feedback that way. But some people like surveys or written [feedback] or smaller focus groups or bigger groups. So, there should be a lot of different ways to engage young people and not just [in] this focus group. Focus groups are awesome. But there could be other ways also to engage people so that folks can be comfortable providing their input.”

—Focus group participant/lived experience expert

Create training roles for young people to prepare state CFSR teams to engage young people

- Establish an opportunity for young people to create and lead/co-lead trainings.
 - Trainings should be trauma-informed and interactive to develop the skills and knowledge staff need to successfully engage young people, including cultural humility, the ability to trust, understanding nuances, creating safe spaces, listening, cultivating patience and self-reflection, and collaborating.

Close the feedback loop

- Ensure young people receive CFSR results or products that stem from their involvement.
- Disseminate CFSR results and data to young people to show how their input has helped and/or led to change within the child welfare system.
 - Ask young people if they see their experiences or that of their peers represented in the data.

Continuously communicate with young people

- Use social media to post CFSR updates and announcements.
- Create email or text chains to alert young people about upcoming CFSR opportunities.

Conclusion

This brief summarizes results from a series of focus groups in which young people with lived experience were asked how to best engage young people in the CFSRs. In summary, the engagement of young people in the CFSRs should occur across all:

Ages: Engage young people as early as possible (e.g., engage school-aged young people in care in case-related interviews, when developmentally appropriate, and engage young people beginning as early as age 14 in stakeholder interviews).

Stages: Engage young people in care and young people who are no longer in care.

Phases: Engage young people in the statewide assessment process (and SWDI), the onsite review, PIP development and monitoring, and between CFSR rounds.

Although systemic change will require dedicated time, resources, and commitment from staff and young people, the voices of young people are critical to a well-functioning child welfare system.