

Incorporating Lived Experience Into Child Welfare Capacity Building

Highlights From the Children's Bureau's Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative

Raising the voices of people with lived experience (LE) has become a central tenet of federal, state, and local child welfare initiatives. Child welfare recognizes that individuals who directly experience the child welfare system as parents or children and indirectly as extended family, tribal, and community members have a unique understanding of how the system works. Their perspective is essential to improving policies and practices intended to keep children safe and families together. The Children's Bureau's *2021/2022 Prevention Resource Guide* states the following:

Community and family members with lived experience offer a unique perspective that, when heeded, can improve family engagement, and ultimately increase the effectiveness of services.... Although direct service providers are on the front lines of work with families, the burden of this legacy cannot fall on their shoulders alone. Frontline workers, agency administrators, and community leaders alike must commit to new ways of listening to the wisdom of people with lived experience and developing meaningful partnerships with the communities and families they serve. (pp. 41–42)

The Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative (CBC) provides technical assistance to states, courts, and tribes as these jurisdictions strive to improve child welfare systems by engaging people with lived experience in system improvement efforts. Drawing on discussions with CBC Centers' liaisons and the existing literature, this brief describes how the Centers incorporated lived experience and supported jurisdictions across the country in building their capacity.

About This Brief

This brief identifies approaches the [Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative](#) uses to support child welfare jurisdictions in incorporating lived experience into child welfare practice and evaluation.



Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this brief is to inform child welfare professionals about the work being done by the Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative (The Collaborative), which includes the Center for Courts, Center for States, and the Center for Tribes (Centers), to build the capacity of jurisdictions to integrate the voices of people with LE into child welfare system reform. The brief provides (1) a short overview of the CBC; (2) the methods used; (3) a review of how “lived experience” has been described and operationalized in existing research and resources; (4) how lived experience has been defined and incorporated into Center efforts to improve services; (5) approaches to integrate the challenges and recommendations into child welfare projects; and (6) opportunities for incorporating lived experience into projects.

Given the differences in how jurisdictions operationalized the concept of lived experience, it is important to develop a clear but comprehensive definition of what is meant by lived experience. For this brief, we will use a definition, based on a myriad of sources (Aparicio, 2017; Blakeslee & Walker, 2018; Callejas et al., 2021).

Guiding Question

How has the CBC supported jurisdictions in integrating lived experience into child welfare reform initiatives?

Definition of Lived Experience

People with lived experience are those who have personal experience with the child welfare system. This includes parents whose children were removed from their homes, youth who were placed in out-of-home care, kinship, and foster caregivers, as well as key members of tribal nations in which affected tribal families are embedded.

Lived experience is a concept that may resonate differently with different communities. Those with tribal affiliations may define lived experience as engaging in and promoting culture that is embedded in the fabric of their daily lives rather than as an episodic experience. With the effects of historical trauma and disproportionality that continue to affect tribal communities, lived experience is not a separate conversation in the work of child welfare. Many of those who work within their tribal nations and within tribal child welfare programs are directly affected by the child welfare system and the systemic issues that drive disproportionality.

The Capacity Building Collaborative

In 2014, the Children’s Bureau formed the Capacity Building Collaborative (the Collaborative) (James Bell Associates & ICF, 2020). The Collaborative comprises three Capacity Building Centers (the Centers).

- The Center for States serves state and territorial Title IV-B and IV-E public child welfare agencies serving all 50 states and territories.
- The Center for Tribes serves Title IV-B and Title IV-E tribal child welfare agencies and organizations.
- The Center for Courts serves state and tribal Court Improvement Programs (CIPs).

The Centers develop and offer three types of services: universal, constituency, and tailored. Universal and constituency services are intended to build the capacity of professionals across multiple jurisdictions (James Bell Associates & ICF, 2020). Centers create content and disseminate information and materials that are broadly relevant to child welfare, tribal partners, and court professionals (universal services); they also generate content specific to the roles of different interested parties (e.g., peer groups and events designed for specialized roles) in the child welfare system (constituency services). Tailored services offer customized support to meet the unique capacity building needs of an individual state, tribe, or CIPs.

Methods

Qualitative methods were used to examine how the Centers incorporated LE into their capacity building initiatives.¹ The following items describe how literature, materials, and information were identified and analyzed for this brief.

- **Literature review.** To gather background on the topic of LE, an initial online search for peer-reviewed literature yielded more than 120 articles that included terms related to lived experience.² Twenty-one articles were identified as most relevant and reviewed individually.
- **Selection of Center projects.** To describe the work that the CBC has done with individual jurisdictions across the country, the study team identified Centers’ projects that included LE in some manner. Centers often engage in projects in jurisdictions that are tailored to the site and last from 1 month to several years, depending on the scope of the project. All Centers enter

¹ Data collection occurred in summer 2022; and activities/events that happened after that point are not reflected in this brief. The data collected were solely based on what was communicated during discussions with Center representatives, as well as data captured within CapTRACK.

² The search criteria included articles about the U.S. child welfare system that contained the terms “lived experience,” “parent engagement,” or “youth engagement” and were published no earlier than 2010.

information about work conducted in jurisdictions into a searchable online data tracking system (CapTRACK). CapTRACK was developed by the Cross-Center Evaluation team to facilitate communication and evaluation (James Bell Associates & ICF, 2018). The study team used CapTRACK to identify 20 projects that focused on LE in various ways. Eight of these were eligible for inclusion in this brief.³

- **Facilitated discussions with Center staff.** After projects were identified, the study team conducted six discussions with Center liaisons to confirm how the projects addressed LE and to what extent. Subsequent correspondence with Center directors provided additional information about how Centers built internal capacity to provide technical assistance related to LE.
- **Document review.** The study team used information from CapTRACK, the Centers' written reports, and a review of the [CBC website](#) to incorporate additional details about relevant resources and activities focused across the three Centers.

Literature Review

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify published peer-reviewed articles in any discipline that referenced LE and child welfare or parent or youth engagement.

The literature suggests that LE is a concept that evolved over time. Over the past 2 decades, child welfare has recognized the importance of not only positive youth development but also the importance of empowering youth to help design the systems that serve them (e.g., Aparicio, 2017; Blakeslee & Walker, 2018; Callejas et al., 2021). With the expansion of independent living programs, a focus on positive youth development, and the creation of youth advisory councils, child welfare began to recognize the importance of integrating youth voice in both individual case plans and the development of programs and services designed to support them (e.g., Crowe, 2007; Forenza & Happonen, 2016; Newman et al., 2021). In child welfare, the current focus on LE emerged from the recognition of the positive impact of participatory processes on both individuals and organizations. The literature predominantly describes organizational activities intended to incorporate the voices of youth (e.g., youth advisory boards, positive youth development) rather than those of parents or adults.

The literature focuses on using the voices of people with LE as a qualitative data source for traditional evaluation methods (Radey et al., 2017; Simmons-Horton, 2021; Yoo & Abiera, 2020). However, some articles examine the value of incorporating people with LE into advisory boards and

³ Projects were selected based on the following criteria: (1) must have had at least one component of LE integrated into service provision (i.e., evaluation, practice, and/or policy) and (2) must have had at least three meetings as a project with a technical assistance provider.

provide insights into how to structure advisory boards and the utility of such efforts (Augsberger et al., 2016; Augsberger et al., 2019; Forenza & Happonen, 2016; Estrella & Kelley, 2017). A few publications provide guidance on authentically incorporating people with LE in meaningful ways to improve child welfare systems. These publications offer frameworks to support meaningful engagement (beyond advisory groups) and to create client-driven (Blakeslee & Walker, 2018; Merritt et al., 2022) and youth-driven (Crowe, 2007; Kautz, 2019; Sprague Martinez et al., 2018) organizations. Overarchingly, youth participation frameworks encourage a collaborative relationship through shared work that is rooted within engagement in planning, decision-making, and action (Blakeslee & Walker, 2018). Literature also focuses on youth empowerment and provides recommendations for incorporating youth experience to inform agency practice at individual, organizational, and policy levels (Dupuis & Mann-Feder, 2013; Mishraky et al., 2020).

We identified additional resources relevant to LE and child welfare (i.e., gray literature). These resources (see exhibit 1) provide practical recommendations about how to authentically partner with people with LE in systemic reform efforts.⁴The body of knowledge highlights the variation in how child welfare has operationalized the concept of LE. It is important to note that this knowledge pertains primarily to dominant western culture; LE may be defined differently by tribal communities. Additional research is needed to better understand Indigenous perspectives and critical cultural contexts.

Exhibit 1. Examples of Recent Resources on Lived Experience Relevant to Child Welfare

Year	Title	Resource
2022	How Can Organizations Assess Their Readiness to Co-Design? (Casey Family Programs)	Brief
2022	What Are the Four Pillars of Authentic Engagement With Communities and Individuals With Lived Experience Through Co-Design? (Casey Family Programs)	Strategy brief
2022	A Starter Kit on Engaging People With Lived Experience in Child Support Programs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)	Starter kit
2022	Engaging People With Lived Experience: Resources From Division X ⁵ Technical Assistance (Capacity Building Center for States)	Web resource
2021	Methods and Emerging Strategies to Engage People With Lived Experience: Improving Federal Research, Policy, and Practice (ASPE and ICF)	Brief

⁴ Exhibit 3 includes additional LE resources developed by the Centers.

⁵ Division X was developed independent of the Center for States and was later integrated into the Center for State's operations. Therefore, this resource is included in general resources on LE, rather than as a product of the Center for States.

Year	Title	Resource
2021	Embracing Community Wisdom of Lived Experience (Child Welfare Information Gateway)	Resource guide
2020	The Power of the Parents' Voice (Children's Bureau)	Podcast
2020	ACF Youth Engagement Team (Children's Bureau)	Podcast
2020	The Essential Voices and Experiences of Youth Formerly in Foster Care (Children's Bureau)	Article
2020	Engaging People With Lived Experience Toolkit (Community Commons)	Toolkit
2016	Nothing About Us Without Us: Seven Principles for Leadership and Inclusion of People With Lived Experience of Homelessness (Homeless Hub)	Resource guide
2016	Compensating People with Lived Experience: Best Practices and Highlights from the Literature (University of Guelph College of Social and Applied Sciences)	Literature review

Building Capacity Through Universal Services: Learning Experiences, Events, and Products

Using data from CapTRACK, the study team identified different types of universal services, learning experiences, products and events that were focused on building capacity in jurisdictions to engage people with LE.⁶ This section provides examples of these universal capacity building resources developed by the Center for States (CBCS).⁷

Learning Experiences

The CBCS developed and hosted several learning experiences in the past few years to provide universal resources and guidance to promote the authentic engagement of people with lived experience. These events and trainings were offered both virtually and in person, and most were recorded and archived for access over time.

⁶ This list is not exhaustive; it includes resources that were available in CapTRACK or publicly available to the cross-center team during data collection.

⁷ Resources were not found on the websites of the Center for Courts and Center for Tribes at the time of the search. Resources developed after this time are not reflected in this section.

- Family Empowerment and Leadership Academy ([FELA](#)): According to the CBCS website, FELA is built on a premise that “when agencies, families, and community partners work together, they can more effectively promote the well-being of the children and parents they serve and increase the chance of keeping families together.” FELA offers learning opportunities for agency staff and family leaders to “build foundational knowledge about family empowerment and engagement, see examples of real-life strategies, and spark conversation with staff and stakeholders.” Resources can be used to build individual, team, or agency capacity to engage and collaborate with families through individual learning modules, 2-day in-person training curriculum, and the FELA implementation manual.
- Child Welfare Virtual Expos (CWVE): Each year, the Children’s Bureau tasks the CBCS with bringing together child welfare professionals, collaborative partners, and youth and families with LE to learn and discuss the most pressing topics of interest in the profession. In 2021 and 2022, the CWVE focused on engaging families at the case level and incorporating the voices of people with LE in system change initiatives. CapTRACK descriptions of these events are as follows.
 - [CWVE 2021](#). Families and youth with LE and other national experts provided presentations on exploring strategies to advance racial equity and engagement in child welfare. They paired videos with a discussion guide to prompt learning and reflection on racial inequities and to develop plans to put ideas into action, with sessions devoted to racial equity and authentic engagement in child welfare.
 - [CWVE 2022](#). Individuals with LE in child welfare and child welfare professionals from federal, state, tribal, and local organizations across the country were brought together to engage in online learning, dynamic discussions, and skill-building activities that explored intentionally partnering with people with LE and expertise throughout all levels of child welfare.

Events

The Centers also developed several webinars and virtual events on the topic of engaging youth and families with LE. The following CBCS examples from CapTRACK⁸ focus on the peer or system level.

- *National Foster Care Month Virtual Event: [Practical Strategies for Engaging Young People \(2021\)](#)* is a webinar that highlights three jurisdiction efforts to encourage family and youth engagement at three levels of engagement (individual family/youth, peer, and system levels).
- *Kinship Care Month Webinar: [Lifting the Voices of Kinship Caregivers Through Advisory Council Engagement and Peer Mentoring \(2021\)](#)* is a 90-minute webinar that highlights the efforts of several kinship navigator programs that engage caregivers and solicit their feedback through the development of advisory councils and peer mentoring approaches. Program staff and caregivers discuss what works and challenges and opportunities to further integrate LE voices into the work of supporting kinship families.

⁸ The descriptions in CapTRACK were written during the planning phase of each event; descriptions may have changed once the events took place. The events described are a subset of events that were captured within CapTRACK and incorporated some aspect of LE.

- *Sustaining Partnership With Family Leaders to Implement Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) (2021)* explores the benefits and challenges of sustaining family engagement in FFPSA Implementation teams during the implementation phase. The webinar’s goal is to increase participant knowledge of effective strategies to integrate people with LE as partners, examine the importance of assessing for and intentionally building readiness, understand the different levels and models for inclusion, highlight state examples on how it builds capacity to integrate people with LE in FFPSA implementation, and share available Center resources. Attendees had a chance to engage in peer-to-peer discussions that identified strategies to assess their current capacity to integrate people with LE as partners in FFPSA implementation.
- *The Power of Peer Support to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes (2022)* is a webinar that highlights the power of peer support models and the importance of involving people with LE as co-creators and leaders in the implementation process. Representatives from states and jurisdictions that implement Parent Partner Programs present their peer support models, efforts to include family leaders in the design and implementation of those models, what worked well, challenges, and the impact of peer support in child welfare outcomes.
- *Division X Virtual Peer to Peer: Building Youth Peer Support Programs (2022)* celebrates the successes, accomplishments, lessons learned, challenges, and opportunities that came from the Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act. It highlighted the strategies states and jurisdictions devised to include young people in the child welfare workforce to facilitate resource navigation, connection, support, and advocacy. In addition, in 2021, the Children’s Bureau funded a QIC-Engaging Youth in Permanency to further support youth voice and leadership.

Products

Live experiences, videos, and discussions often culminate in publicly available resources. Exhibit 2 lists resources available on the CBCS website that provide guidance to child welfare professionals in identifying strategies to increase engagement of people with LE into system transformation.⁹

Exhibit 2. CBCS Resources on Engaging Individuals With Lived Experience

Year	Title	Resources
2022	A Look Inside Sharing Power in Child Welfare: A Podcast	Podcast series
2022	Child Welfare Virtual Expo 2022: Power in Partnerships: Prioritizing Lived Expertise in Child Welfare	Virtual expo
2022	Creating Partnership in Kinship Treatment Foster Care	Recorded webinar
2022	Family Engagement: A Collaborative Process for Systems Change	Video

⁹ The resources in Exhibit 2 are a subset of resources that were available on the CBCS website and identified some aspect of LE. Web searches occurred in summer of 2022; LE resources were not found on the websites of the Center for Courts and Center for Tribes at the time of the search. Resources developed after this time are not reflected in this exhibit.

Year	Title	Resources
2022	Strategic Planning in Child Welfare: Strategies for Meaningful Youth, Family, and Other Partner Engagement	Brief
2022	Voices of Lived Experience in Child Welfare	Video library with discussion guide
2021	Co-Creating Equitable Child Welfare Policies and Practice	Video with discussion guide
2021	Debra, Kayla, and Brittany's Story	Video series
2021	Prevention Planning Roundtable: Engaging Youth, Families, Communities, and Tribes in Planning Video	Video
2021	Stories From the Field: Practical Strategies for Engaging Young People Recorded Webinar	Recorded webinar
2021	Visioning for Prevention: Transforming Partnerships to Achieve Change	Recorded webinar
2019	Becoming a Family-Focused System: Archived Webinars	Webinar
2019	Creating a Vision Together: Engaging Families and Youth for Better Outcomes	CBX article
2019	Meaningfully Engaging Stakeholders to Improve Outcomes	Video
2019	Partnering With Families and Youth to Shift System Culture	Video
2019	Strategies for Authentic Integration of Family and Youth Voice in Child Welfare	Brief
2017	Youth Engagement Blueprint	Written series
n/a	Voices of Lived Experience in Child Welfare	Digital story library
n/a	Youth Development	Resource series

The Collaborative’s Capacity Building Support to Jurisdictions

The three Capacity Building Centers provide an array of supports to public child welfare state agencies, courts, and tribes on a wide range of topics, with a focus on helping jurisdictions engage people with lived experience into their local system reform efforts. To understand the integration of LE from the collaborations between the Centers and jurisdictions, the study team identified nine tailored service projects that met specified criteria.¹⁰ Evaluation staff held discussions with Center liaisons for some of the following projects, based on input provided by staff who could be interviewed (exhibit 3).¹¹

Guiding Question

How have the Centers supported jurisdictions in integrating LE into child welfare reform initiatives?

Exhibit 3. Overview of Nine Tailored Service Projects Focused on Lived Experience

Project	Jurisdiction	Overview
CQI Infrastructure Support (Center for States)	California <i>Region 9</i>	The California Department of Social Services is developing continuous quality improvement (CQI) processes for data throughout the state.
Independent Living Support (Center for States)	Nevada <i>Region 9</i>	This project includes development of a statewide coaching model for child welfare supervisors and increased coordination with the courts, court personnel, and foster care system.
Strengthening the Hennepin County Independent Living Skills and Extended Foster Care Program (Center for States)	Minnesota <i>Region 5</i>	The Minnesota Department of Human Services is redesigning CQI processes to improve safety, permanence, and well-being outcomes. This includes the development, engagement, and training of the CQI community advisory board.
Strategic Planning Support (Center for States)	Nebraska <i>Region 7</i>	This project is focused on developing a cohesive strategic direction, staffing and governance structure, and mechanisms for partner involvement.

¹⁰ Projects were selected based on the following criteria: (1) had at least one component of LE integrated within service provision (i.e., evaluation, practice, and/or policy) and (2) had at least three meetings as a project with a technical assistance provider.

¹¹ Please note that Division X was considered independent of the CBCS at the time discussions were completed so the project was not included in this study.

Project	Jurisdiction	Overview
Strengthen Family Engagement and Family Voice (Center for States)	South Carolina <i>Region 4</i>	This project seeks to improve communication between state and local agencies through improving communication about strategies to assess organizational capacity.
Joint Project on Re-Entry of Black Children into Foster Care – Phase One (Center for Courts)	Minnesota <i>Region 5</i>	This project focuses on building the capacity of the judicial state workforce to make meaningful, specific, and legally compliant reasonable efforts findings in child welfare cases.
Judicial, Court, and Attorney Measures of Performance (JCAMP) (Center for Courts)	Florida, Georgia, Delaware, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians <i>Regions 3 and 4</i>	JCAMP developed a set of performance measures to help document and improve child welfare court practices.
Strategic Planning (Center for Courts)	Florida <i>Region 4</i>	This project focuses on support for strategic planning that incorporates change management, increased evaluation of progress, and assistance with daily decisions within the child welfare system.
Build the Tribe’s Capacity to Develop and Maintain an Effective Tribal Child Welfare System That Addresses and Integrates the Tribe’s Culture and Values (Center for Tribes)	Kenaitze Tribe <i>Region 10</i>	This project focused on increasing the Kenaitze Indian Tribe’s capacity by developing and sustaining a direct Title IV-E program grounded in the tribe’s values and culture.

CBC Tailored Service Projects and Center Practices That Incorporate Lived Experience Among the projects included in exhibit 3, several tailored service projects are highlighted below as examples of how jurisdictions supported by the Centers engage people with LE and incorporate their perspective into child welfare policy and practice.¹²

¹² Data collection occurred in the summer of 2022 and was solely based on what was communicated during discussions with Center representatives as well as data captured within CapTRACK. Because of Center staff turnover, the people we spoke with may not have been familiar with all details about the projects.

Capacity Building Center for States

The CBCS strives to engage at least one LE expert as a family or young adult consultant in all projects. CBCS also maintains a pool of LE consultants who can be accessed for involvement in various center services. Previously, CBCS engaged with family and young adult consultants as representatives of the child welfare system in an advisory role at conferences, summits, and for resource development of new child welfare policies and practices. However, CBCS recently transitioned its practices toward a more robust process that includes recruiting, training, and supporting LE consultants. As a result, CBCS prioritized the development of an LE engagement model that promotes a sustainable and evolving infrastructure of resources and supports for family and young adult consultants.

CBCS also made efforts to increase the capacity of jurisdictions to incorporate LE into tailored service projects. The Center implemented one-on-one coaching and modeling processes that promote engagement of LE consultants in tailored service projects within CBCS. CBCS's approach to jurisdictional coaching and modeling has a foundational commitment to cultivating relationships with LE consultants by engaging them at the beginning of services and projects to center their expertise and knowledge on service delivery. For example, Center liaisons developed youth engagement trainings to increase the capacity of the jurisdictions by providing agency engagement tools that can be used internally to further their skill set in working with LE consultants.

These tools informed tailored service projects such as Nevada's *Independent Living Support*. In this project, LE consultants assist the state agency on how engaging youth within independent living can provide insight into meaningful ways to inform and improve child welfare policies and practices. Projects such as this use engagement techniques such as pacing conversations and modeling best practices to formulate a more authentic relationship between project staff and the LE consultant.

In Minnesota, the *Strengthening the Hennepin County Independent Living Skills and Extended Foster Care Program* uses an in-depth coaching approach as a mechanism to incorporate LE. In this project, the liaison worked with the jurisdiction to integrate LE consultants within the assessment and work planning processes. This expertise informed system operations early in the process to improve child welfare practice.

"I think this success is about the lived expert being really integrated in our team. And we really work to make sure that folks are not marginalized, tokenized there but have no role, right? And I think that's been part of the progression of us as a center."

—Center Liaison

CBCS made considerable efforts internally within the Center and externally within jurisdictions to increase the capacity for meaningful inclusion of LE expertise. Center representatives expressed their dedication to modeling a collaborative LE consultant engagement framework to promote and accommodate meaningful participation of LE consultants within the Center and throughout jurisdictions.

Capacity Building Center for Courts

The Capacity Building Center for Courts (CBCC) increased the number of projects having an emphasis on integrating LE consultants within study design, implementation, and intervention teams. The consultants are given roles within the “core” team to provide insight on components of a project and/or program. The core team is often responsible for primary project processes. For example, a CBCC project on a Minnesota site, *Joint Project on Re-Entry of Black Children Into Foster Care—Phase One*, included the core team in assisting with project guidance on root cause analyses that are used to identify problems within child welfare programs.

On other tailored service projects, such as Florida’s *Building a Lived Experience Collaborative to Support the Work of the Court Improvement Program*, the jurisdiction incorporates the LE consultant on the design component of interventions as a mechanism to include a robust analytical and systems-changing perspective. To gain insight into the LE of Black child welfare professionals, this project considers how the definition of LE can be augmented to include professionals. Compensation is provided to the consultants to recognize the value of their perspective.

CBCC’s *Judicial, Court, and Attorney Measures of Performance* (JCAMP) project provides an example of a high level of integration of infusing LE. JCAMP integrates LE in all aspects of the project. The primary core team members include professionals and a paid LE consultant. All members have the same voting privileges, project information, authority, and support within the project. This high level of integration requires a level of intentionality rooted in flexibility, transparency, and authenticity from the beginning. Center liaisons suggested this means that power levels among all individuals involved must be neutralized; thus, everyone gets an individual vote, the same information, and the same opportunities.

“So, that’s why I say from day one, I don’t care how many degrees you have, I don’t care where you live; you get one vote, you get the same vote as everyone, you just do.”

—Center Liaison

The project is composed of subgroups in which court officers, lawyers, Supreme Court justices, and youth advisors with LE are paid for their participation within their advisory roles in all aspects of the project. Within this project design, the subgroups engage as an entity that is determined by

members of the group; thus, any project topic or idea of interest becomes an option to address. For example, a group of youth and child welfare alumni developed a subgroup called the Equity Crew, whose interest in equity facilitated how it should be addressed and handled within JCAMP.

Within this higher level of incorporation, LE consultants are also involved in the facilitation of project design and implementation. For example, JCAMP parent and youth groups were involved in generating model questions for focus groups and surveys throughout the project. LE consultants were also involved in providing feedback on every deliverable or product.

Capacity Building Center for Tribes

The Capacity Building Center for Tribes (CBCT) includes staff and consultants across every service area with LE in tribal communities and deep knowledge and practice experience with child welfare. Several have direct personal involvement with the child welfare system, being a part of it themselves and/or as kin or adoptive relatives. Indian Child Welfare (ICW) professionals who partner with CBCT usually live in the communities in which they work, often as enrolled tribal members with deep cultural ties and relationships with children, youth, and families whom they serve. Tribal Councils, leaders, and elders are involved in aspects of all tailored services projects or consultations as LE consultants in all aspects of Center operations.

One example of this approach is being implemented with the Kenaitze Tribe. Since CBCT began working with the Tribe, many Tribal Council members (current and/or former) and elders were closely involved with the work. Incorporating community voice is central to working collaboratively with the Tribe to strengthen ICW organizational policies and procedures that were developed specifically to guide tailored service projects.

CBCT also engages tribal community members—including families who were involved with ICW, foster or kinship caregivers, and tribal elders and leaders—as LE consultants. These community members have a wealth of knowledge that can provide insight into diverse community practices, belief systems, customs, and history of each individual community that are protective factors for Native children and families. Often, these experts are engaged through tailored service projects and may be included in Tribal Organizational Assessments that the CBCT Evaluation Team administers.

Building Capacity of Jurisdictions Incorporating Lived Experience Into Tailored Services

What are the challenges faced by Centers in supporting jurisdictions with capacity building services that incorporate LE? Center liaisons reported that the integration of LE involves building capacity among leadership, partners, and staff to shift mindsets regarding its importance and meaning to the project. Some jurisdictions spent considerable time engaging organizational leadership in dialogue regarding the rationale for incorporating LE at levels outside of advisory board roles. Discussions with the Centers and the review of extant literature indicated that LE consultants may be integrated into change initiatives at different levels, from using an advisory board to engaging with LE consultants as equal partners from the beginning and throughout the duration of the project. Based on discussions with Center liaisons and the literature review, these differing aspects of or engagement of people with LE reflects a spectrum across three levels (see exhibit 4) that fall into a spectrum of participation.¹³

Inform and consult. At this level, projects use LE in areas that include advisory boards, councils, or other important forums to aid a project, program, or organization. This level of incorporation could also include conducting interviews, observations, or meetings to engage in, learn from, and advance knowledge formation from participants' LE. However, consultants are often not compensated for their time outside of traditional incentives for research engagement, and there are no expectations regarding the inclusion of LE experts in project operations. Power is unequal, and project leaders maintain authority, control, and expectations related to the success of the project or program.

Involve. This midlevel range of integrating LE is multifaceted in that expertise can be present in three or more components of a project or program (e.g., project development, membership with the core team making decisions, supporting data analysis). Compensation rates are higher, and participants may engage in project development and implementation. Power remains unequal; however, LE may shift the nature of the project.

Collaborate and empower. The highest level of incorporating LE must include partnership and participation in every aspect from project or program development (e.g., providing space for elders and giving them the respect of sharing their wisdom, at their pace), design, and implementation to data analysis. Participants are compensated in the same capacity as other project professionals and are provided with the same level of expectations as those leading the project. Power is also equalized—everyone has the same power, control, and expectations related to the project's success.

¹³ This continuum of engagement was derived and adapted from [IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation](#).

Exhibit 4. Continuum of Engagement of Lived Experience Consultants

Participation	Involvement	Compensation	Power
Inform and Consult	Advisory boards, councils, individual interviews, focus groups	Consultants are not compensated outside of traditional incentives.	Power is unequal given that project leaders maintain authority and control of project; project is not shifted based on lived experience (LE) perspective.
Involve	LE is multifaceted and is engaged in three or more categories.	LE consultants are compensated for their time in more than traditional research incentives.	Power is unequal, but LE expertise and insight can shift the project.
Collaborate and Empower	Engagement and participation from LE consultants in all aspects of the project or program (e.g., development, design, implementation, data analysis); LE is seen as an equal partner.	LE consultants are compensated equitably, the same as all project team members.	Power is equal. Everyone has the same level of authority, control, and expectations.

Source: This exhibit was created by JBA and reflects the collective information gathered from the literature review and interviews with Center staff.

“There isn’t a one-size approach to incorporating lived experience...you have to look at [it] as an opportunity to change the culture. So, looking at it as a culture shift and what needs to happen to change the culture of child welfare really required me to take an individual approach.”

—Center Liaison

Child welfare jurisdictions vary significantly in how they implement and operationalize strategies to incorporate lived experience LE into child welfare system improvement. From the literature review and discussions with Center staff, people with LE are integrated into child welfare practice improvement efforts in various ways. Following are descriptions of the ways LE may be integrated.

Population interest. Discussions with Center liaisons indicated jurisdictions vary in their definition of LE consultants, ranging from youth who experienced foster care placement to adults who were involved in child welfare as parents, foster parents, and kinship caregivers. Some jurisdictions even suggest direct service professionals (e.g., case workers, attorneys, judges) can also be considered people with LE, given their daily view of child welfare practice. Existing literature more frequently focuses on incorporating the youth perspective rather than the adult perspective, perhaps because of the history of youth empowerment in child welfare systems.

Micro or macro strategies. LE informs case-level (micro) practice and system-level (macro) reforms (Crowe, 2007). *Micro-level strategies* focus on improving case-level practice to ensure youth or parents play a pivotal role in making decisions about their own care (e.g., case planning, placement options, service provision). One example from the Center for Tribes is [Engaging and Supporting Native Grandfamilies](#). *Macro-level strategies* focus on integrating the voices of people with LE into organizational or system-level decision-making processes. At the macro level, the voices are integrated into designing, implementing, and evaluating policies, programs, and services. Authentic engagement at the macro level occurs when people with LE are included in design and implementation teams and in research endeavors and leadership positions to promote system change.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion. Inevitably, incorporating the voices of people with LE will advance diversity, equity, and inclusion into child welfare practice and policies. Because of the disproportionate representation of people of color and those who identify as LGBTQ+ in the child welfare system, people with LE may be more reflective of the child welfare population than the child welfare workforce (Barbee & Antle, 2021). As a specific example, this type of engagement is particularly critical to developing a nuanced understanding of tribal culture, context, and communities.

“If you are going to talk about equity and inclusion, you have to have lived experience experts at the table.”

—Center Liaison

Additional Considerations for Incorporating Lived Experience Into Child Welfare Projects

Several lessons can be derived from CBC’s efforts to build capacity of states, tribes, and courts to authentically infuse LE in efforts to improve child welfare policies and practices. Exhibit 2 lists CBCS resources that were developed to support varying approaches to integrating LE expertise.

Benefits of Incorporating Lived Experience

For youth LE experts, engaging in systemic and organizational processes provides opportunities for integration of their voices into systems of care. This provides opportunities to enhance positive youth development principles (Blakeslee & Walker, 2018) and youth partnerships with the child welfare system. Participation and engagement as LE consultants empower youth to develop critical consciousness by leveraging their personal experiences as possible agents of system change through program or policy recommendations.

At an organizational level, integration of LE enhances program and project quality through the incorporation of discussions, knowledge, and experiences that can improve organizational operations.

LE expertise provides the organization with an opportunity to examine what works within its operations and service provision and what components of operations could benefit from improvement. For Indigenous communities, this approach ensures traditional ways of being and the practice of supporting families with Indigenous world views are front and center.

For research and evaluation, LE offers a chance to shift toward engaging in a partnership, where LE consultants are viewed as active change agents throughout the entirety of a project.

The LE expertise enriches and expands the project in aspects of quality and overall success. Offering consultants the opportunity to provide feedback and meaningful engagement in these spaces gives the project authenticity and leveraging power to effectively change the system.

“The highest measure of success in this project is at the end, as we’re closing it out and we’re giving people an opportunity to give feedback or say how it went. I am hearing people with lived experience say, ‘This is the first time I felt meaningfully included in something. I could do whatever I want; I could say whatever I want; I could have whatever position I want. And not only could I have that position; but I could say it out loud, and I see where it’s in the study.’”

—Center Liaison

Complexities of Incorporating Lived Experience

Based on discussions with Center liaisons, the following complexities should be understood when integrating LE.

“When you empower people...and you tell them you are free to give input...you have to be willing to hear it.”

—*Center Liaison*

Youth and families face multiple demands in their lives including education, parenting, school, and other life circumstances that affect their ability to engage in programs and projects as consultants. These provide constraints on the time that LE consultants can contribute to meetings, groups, and engagement with projects or programs (Augsberger et al., 2019).

Child welfare leadership must embrace the importance of LE for true integration of the expertise through the program or project. Child welfare leadership shapes the value of LE from the beginning stages of a project or a program. Organizations need to assess whether they are embracing this work because of system requirements, or whether they truly believe these consultants bring a perspective that can improve child welfare services. It is important for leadership to determine the most appropriate approach to incorporate LE and the level of expertise best suited for the outcomes.

True representation requiring diverse voices can be difficult when engaging with LE expertise. It is important to recognize that no one person can represent all perspectives. Given that individuals have different experiences, identifying a diverse group of LE expertise can be challenging. A project may have a handful of voices from people with LE yet may not represent a consensus. One or even several voices provide some information; however, without broader efforts to ensure diverse representation of LE in child welfare reform efforts, there is a risk of drawing conclusions based on insufficient viewpoints. All efforts to integrate a diverse group of perspectives must be done. Disproportionality in child welfare is problematic, and understanding the LEs of those who are most marginalized through representation ensures the LE voice in child welfare reform efforts.

Integration of LE at the collaborate and empower level presents unique challenges. First, there must be intentionality with identifying a core team to lead and represent multiple facets of expertise. This presents challenges with identifying those who meet specific qualifications and who are also open to participating in child welfare reform efforts. This level of integration also requires equitable financial supports to ensure all consultants are equitably compensated.

“I think sometimes we create kind of this little pedestal where it’s like, ‘Oh, we want you to come and tell us your experience so that we can change everything and make it better.’ Well, one, your one experience is not the universal, and two, that’s a huge amount of pressure to put on someone to be like, ‘Oh, you tell us the way it is.’ All right...no...I don’t think people want that, I think they want to be meaningfully engaged. They want to say, ‘This is my experience, but how does it fit into the universal? How can I help make this better?’ And I think when we do that to people, we kind of set them up.”

—Center Liaison

Conclusion

The Capacity Building Centers used several processes to increase capacity to integrate LE efforts into tailored projects for child welfare system reform. Each uses the expertise of LE consultants to gain insight into areas of child welfare practice. This expertise can be difficult to understand through a professional lens. However, **to be truly committed to incorporating LE into child welfare practice, jurisdictions should be willing to openly engage and integrate client perspective into child welfare policies and procedures.** Jurisdictions need to be intentional when gathering perspectives from people with LE about their individual experience in the child welfare system. A commitment to embracing a LE perspective requires authentic and meaningful inclusion of lived LE consultants in decision-making processes, addressing power dynamics, and ensuring the organizational culture and climate are receptive to change.

A commitment to embracing a lived experience perspective requires authentic and meaningful inclusion of lived experts in decision-making processes, addressing power dynamics, and ensuring the organizational culture and climate are receptive to change.

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