

Preparation Checklist for Engagement of Young People and Families in the CFSR



CFSR Round 4 Planning and Implementation Tool

This document was updated by the National Child Welfare Center for Innovation and Advancement in 2025.

Introduction and Purpose

Engaging young people (youth and young adults) and families (parents, caregivers, and extended family members)¹ with lived experience in child welfare is a central principle of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) (Children's Bureau, 2021). This principle is grounded in "the knowledge that a child welfare system is most effective in achieving its vision and goals to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families, when all partners who have a role in it contribute to its design and operation" (Children's Bureau, 2022a, p.3).

Young people and families with experiences receiving child welfare services are uniquely positioned and offer necessary and valuable insights to

- ♦ Identify what's working and what's not in current child welfare practices
- ♦ Suggest where barriers impede improved outcomes
- ♦ Cocreate strategies for future improvements

To lay the groundwork for meaningful, authentic, and ongoing engagement, agencies must devote time and effort upfront, putting infrastructure and supports into place and ensuring a supportive system. State teams planning for the CFSR can use this tool to assess their readiness for meaningful and sustainable engagement and identify next steps to prepare or make improvements.

Roles for Young People and Families in the CFSR

As part of the State's CFSR team, people with lived experience can contribute in a variety of ways throughout different phases of the CFSR², including but not limited to the following:

- ♦ **During the Statewide Assessment**—Young people and families can help gather and explore data and evidence needed to assess performance and identify areas for attention, participate in focus groups to discuss experiences with child welfare services, review statewide data indicator performance, provide input on systemic factor functioning, and develop data summaries and visuals. Depending on their prior experience and with ongoing training and support, people with lived experience may take on key roles in identified tasks such as coleading focus groups.

Use this tool to:

- ♦ Prepare for engagement of people with lived experience throughout CFSR Round 4
- ♦ Identify needed infrastructure and supports to facilitate meaningful and ongoing engagement practices

Organization

- ♦ [Roles for Young People and Families in the CFSR](#)
- ♦ [Tips and Things to Remember](#)
- ♦ [Engagement Reflections](#)
- ♦ [Foundational Elements for Engagement Worksheet](#)

¹ In this document, "young people" refers to youth and young adults (over 18) who are currently in foster care or who were previously in care. "Families" refer to parents, caregivers, and extended family members who have received child welfare services. These groups are also referred to as "people with lived experience."

² For a more comprehensive list of potential roles, see [Engaging Young People with Lived Experience in the CFSRs: Key Considerations, Roles, and Recommendations](#) and listen to [CFSR Round 4 National Call #4, Stakeholder Engagement: Meaningful Strategies and Expectations for Stakeholders](#).

- ♦ **During the Onsite Review**—Young people and families can share their perspectives in interviews, develop recruitment materials and conduct outreach to other young people, parents, caregivers, and caseworkers for CFSR interviews, help prepare other participants, and support the interview process.
- ♦ **During Program Improvement Plan (PIP) development and monitoring**—Young people and families can review and explore data, identify improvement needs and strategies, support the development of PIP goals, help track progress toward desired outcomes, and identify facilitators and barriers to progress.

Tips and Things to Remember

- ♦ Recognize that people with lived experience are a valuable resource for gaining insight into needs and informing improvements to child welfare services. Engagement of young people and families in the CFSR process not only benefits the child welfare system but also benefits the individuals by building decision-making, critical thinking, advocacy, and leadership skills.
- ♦ Remember that engagement of people with lived experience is not “one size fits all.” Use multiple strategies and tailored approaches to reflect and appeal to a representative range of young people and family members in your State or county. Consider population variance as it relates to differing experiences in child welfare, various placement settings, racial/ethnic representation, age groups, rural/urban representation, and other characteristics.
- ♦ Consider ways to partner with young people and family members, community groups, agency staff, legal and judicial communities, and other partners to reach existing networks of young people and families and collaborate on outreach, training, and ongoing support for engagement in the CFSR.
- ♦ Keep in mind that young people and families considered “challenging” or “hard to reach” may have different views from those individuals frequently represented on boards and workgroups and can offer valuable perspectives on service issues and solutions. Brainstorm innovative engagement strategies and ask young people and family members who have been engaged in system improvement efforts in the past to help engage others, build rapport and trust, and address barriers to participation.
- ♦ Recognize that engagement approaches occur on a continuum that begins with young people and families informing and consulting and deepens into shoulder-to-shoulder collaboration and shared decision-making.
- ♦ Consider and build toward sustainability from the start.
- ♦ Remember that engagement can be challenging and will not always be successful at first. However, ongoing and adaptable efforts to engage can yield valuable results, particularly when the following are present:
 - ♦ Thoughtful preparation for meaningful engagement (see foundational elements in the worksheet below)
 - ♦ Attention to relationship building
 - ♦ A supportive agency environment that fosters engagement and promotes an improvement mindset
 - ♦ Training, support, and capacity building of individuals on all sides of engagement efforts (agency staff, young people, families)
 - ♦ Flexibility in meeting young people and families where they are and when they are available
 - ♦ Continuous improvement of engagement approaches

Without the voice of lived experience from the start, agencies may not truly understand their data and underlying issues and risk missing creative solutions and pathways to improved outcomes.

Find more tips and strategies in the resources listed in the [“For More Information on Engagement of People with Lived Experience”](#) section at the end of this document.

Engagement Reflections

Use this page to reflect on current and desired engagement of young people and families in child welfare system improvement. Get multiple perspectives from a variety of respondents, including families, young people, agency staff, and partners. Consider asking agency staff and individuals with lived experience to respond separately and then reflect on how their responses compare.

What does engagement look like in your State? What can it look like?

In the space below, describe what engagement of young people and families looks like in your State.



Now describe what expanded, authentic, and meaningful engagement could look like. Note how engagement may occur during different phases of the CFSR (Statewide Assessment, Onsite Review, and PIP development and monitoring).

How will engagement of people with lived experience in the CFSR benefit your system improvement efforts?

Foundational Elements for Engagement Worksheet

How have you set a foundation to support meaningful engagement? What needs attention?

Use this worksheet to review foundational elements that support authentic, meaningful, and sustainable engagement.

For each element

- ♦ In the **Status** column, note whether that foundational element for engagement is “in place” (developed and implemented), “in progress” (under development and still being worked on, expanded, or improved), or “none yet” (not yet started).
- ♦ In the **Related Activities** column, describe what your State has done, is doing, or could do to address the element.
- ♦ In the **Element Is Better When** column, review and consider the characteristics identified with best practice and quality improvement.
- ♦ In the **Areas for Attention** column, identify what your team should focus on or strengthen moving forward.

Keep in mind that engagement is a developmental process, and most States will not have all elements in place with all “better when” characteristics.

Element	Status	Related Activities	Element Is Better When	Areas for Attention
Outreach plan and recruitment strategies <i>Approach and strategies for reaching out to and initiating involvement of young people and families in the CFSR</i>	☐ In place ☐ In progress ☐ None yet		Outreach and engagement begin early in the CFSR process and continue throughout each stage of the CFSR. Outreach plans and recruitment strategies are designed and led by people with lived experience. Recruitment builds on established agency and system partner relationships with young people and parent networks and also extends to people who have not been engaged before. Young people and families are asked about their communication preferences and this input is integrated into outreach, recruitment, and ongoing communication strategies. Recruitment strategies vary, are accessible, and reflect multiple avenues to reach community populations. Recruitment for CFSR participation taps into the motivation of people with lived experience to help make the system better for others.	

Element	Status	Related Activities	Element Is Better When	Areas for Attention
Communication plan and materials³ <i>Approach and strategies for reaching out to and initiating involvement of young people and families in the CFSR</i>	☐ In place ☐ In progress ☐ None yet		☐ Communication is frequent, ongoing, and transparent. ☐ Communication plans and materials are cocreated with people with lived experience. ☐ Materials are user friendly, digestible, and explain CFSR processes in an easy-to-understand manner. ☐ Materials clearly describe roles and responsibilities for young people and family members in the CFSR and their importance. ☐ Communication leverages technology and uses multiple formats (e.g., social media, texts, emails, newsletters, calls, meetings).	
Compensation mechanisms <i>Payment and recognition for time and contributions of people with lived experience</i>	☐ In place ☐ In progress ☐ None yet		Compensation reflects the valuable expertise of people with lived experience and is commensurate with rates paid to other experts. Compensation is clearly communicated, discussed, and agreed upon before involvement. Compensation for time and participation is timely and provided as cash, direct deposit, or mobile payment. Compensation is provided in addition to other supports that reduce barriers to participation (e.g., transportation reimbursement, child care, access to technology). Compensation is supplemented with opportunities for professional development and resume building.	

³ As a starting point for foundational resources on the CFSR, see [“Understanding the CFSRs Infographic”](#) and other [CFSR Round 4 process resources on the CFSR Information Portal](#).

Element	Status	Related Activities	Element Is Better When	Areas for Attention
Training and preparation of agency and partners for engagement <i>Activities that build readiness and engagement skills among agency CFSR leads, staff, and partners</i>	☐ In place ☐ In progress ☐ None yet		☐ Training, orientation, and ongoing development for State CFSR team leads and other agency leaders build understanding of what engagement means, engagement goals, and best practices. ☐ Orientation, training, and ongoing development for the CFSR team—including State CQI staff, agency partners, and other CFSR team members—build understanding of strengths-based, trauma-informed, and healing-centered engagement. Orientation, training, and ongoing development for the CFSR team build understanding of engagement roles and responsibilities. Training and development help staff receive and respond to feedback about the child welfare system with an improvement mindset (and not take feedback personally). Training materials and sessions are cocreated and cofacilitated by people with lived experience.	
Training and preparation of people with lived experience for involvement in the CFSR <i>Activities that build readiness and skills for engagement in the CFSR among people with lived experience</i>	☐ In place ☐ In progress ☐ None yet		Training, orientation, and ongoing development for young people and family members builds understanding of CFSR processes, roles, and responsibilities. Training includes high-level overviews and specific learning opportunities in multiple forms to build knowledge and skills. Training and development offer a safe space for questions and learning. Training materials and sessions are cocreated and cofacilitated by people with lived experience.	

Element	Status	Related Activities	Element Is Better When	Areas for Attention
Processes for assigning tasks <i>Intentional procedures for matching and onboarding individuals to specific activities</i>	☐ In place ☐ In progress ☐ None yet		☐ People with lived experience are informed of different CFSR opportunities and asked which activities and roles interest them. ☐ Tasks are aligned with individuals' interests, skills, and expertise (extending beyond their lived expertise) and include developmental opportunities. ☐ The "ask," purpose of participation, time commitment, roles, and expectations are clearly communicated. ☐ Plans for self-care and trauma-informed support are created with the individuals being engaged.	
Coaching and ongoing support <i>Structured processes to promote learning and development and provide needed supports</i>	☐ In place ☐ In progress ☐ None yet		Coaching or mentoring is provided before, during, and after participation in CFSR activities. Young people and family members are provided with one-on-one time with coaches or mentors, including individuals who have applied their own lived experience to system improvement activities. Safe spaces are created for people with lived experience to express their ideas and concerns without judgment or retribution. Opportunities are provided for peer-to-peer connections, support, and community building.	
Feedback loops <i>Avenues for debriefing, providing input, and informing improvements</i>	☐ In place ☐ In progress ☐ None yet		There is cocreation of feedback loops and agreement among agency staff and people with lived experience on how feedback loops will be created, maintained, and revisited. Young people and family members are invited to share challenges and issues within the system and brainstorm solutions and suggestions for system improvement in a supportive manner. Opportunities are built into the engagement process for asking questions, receiving feedback, and debriefing CFSR participation. Young people and family members are provided with updates on the results of their input in the CFSR (e.g., summary reports, CFSR results, and changes and improvements made). Feedback loops reflect intentional partnership with people with lived experience and inform continuous improvement.	

Element	Status	Related Activities	Element Is Better When	Areas for Attention
Culture that supports meaningful engagement <i>Environment and mindsets that value lived expertise, engagement, and shared decision-making</i>	☐ In place ☐ In progress ☐ None yet		☐ Agency leadership demonstrates buy-in and commitment to authentic, meaningful, and ongoing engagement of young people and families. ☐ Organizational norms and workforce attitudes value lived expertise as true expertise. ☐ Young people and family members contribute in meaningful ways to decisions and take on leadership roles. ☐ People with lived experience have formal and informal professional development opportunities. ☐ There is continuous and transparent communication and sharing of ideas.	
Sustainability plan <i>Strategies and practices to keep engagement going over time</i>	☐ In place ☐ In progress ☐ None yet		☐ A sustainability plan addresses the continuation of engagement activities from outreach and recruitment through communication, support, and feedback. ☐ The sustainability plan is co-created and implemented with people with lived experience. ☐ The sustainability plan integrates and builds on engagement activities across child welfare strategic planning, reporting, and improvement efforts (e.g., CFSR/PIP, CFSP, APSR, CQI).	

How will your team monitor the foundational elements for continuous improvement?

Describe how you can apply a CQI process to CFSR engagement activities.

Action Steps

What are key action steps for preparing for engagement during CFSR Round 4?

Considering responses in the prior worksheet, identify specific action steps to set the groundwork for engagement of young people and families with lived experience in CFSR Round 4. For each step, identify the related foundational element and document the expected timeframe, the person(s) responsible, and supporting contributors and partners. Note those steps that may require external support (e.g., input from people with lived experience, capacity building).

Action Steps	Foundational Element	Timeframe	Lead/Contributors	Support Needs

Find More CFSR Planning Tools and Supports

The National Child Welfare Center for Innovation and Advancement (NCWCIA) provides data-driven assistance to public child welfare agencies to help them identify innovative ways to address challenges and improve performance and outcomes so that children can remain safe and with their families whenever possible. For additional resources, visit the NCWCIA website. To request services tailored to your needs, email NCWCIA-Info@jbsinternational.com or contact your [NCWCIA innovation and advancement navigator](#).

For More Information on Engagement of People With Lived Experience

Children's Bureau. (March 16, 2022). [CFSR Round 4 National Call #4. Stakeholder Engagement: Meaningful Strategies and Expectations for Stakeholders](#). (Webinar)

JBS International. (2022). [Engaging Young People With Lived Experience in the CFSRs: Key Considerations, Roles, and Recommendations](#).

Children's Bureau. (2019). [IM-19-03. Engaging, Empowering, and Utilizing Family and Youth Voice in All Aspects of Child Welfare to Drive Case Planning and System Improvement](#).

References

Children's Bureau. (2022a). Child and Family Services Reviews: Guiding principles, framework, and tools for the statewide assessment process.

<https://www.cfsrportal.acf.hhs.gov/resources/round-4-resources/statewide-assessment-swa-and-guidance/guiding-principles-framework-and>

Children's Bureau. (2021, September 21). Child and Family Services Review round 4: Children's Bureau briefing with state child welfare administrators and court improvement managers.

https://www.cfsrportal.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/media/video/cfsr-r4-intro/index.htm?utm_content=widget&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=spotlightaug22

This product was created by the Capacity Building Center for States under Contract No. HHSP2332015000711, funded by the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Suggested citation: Capacity Building Center for States. (2023). *Preparation checklist for engagement of young people and families in the CFSR. CFSR round 4 planning and Implementation tool*. Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

