

What to Know Before Engaging with Lived Experts

Background

This publication provides shared expectations to help professionals prepare for meaningful engagement with lived experts. Lived experience (LE) voice is central to the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) vision that all Wisconsin children and youth are safe and loved members of thriving families and communities.

By partnering with individuals who are directly affected by DCF's programs, policies, and decisions, we are transforming the child welfare system by:

1. Building equity in programs, policies, and practice;
2. Empowering children, youth, caregivers, and families;
3. Bringing awareness and a deeper understanding of system needs and service gaps in the child welfare system, which includes Child Protective Services (CPS) and youth justice, and;
4. **Promoting best practices for partnering with lived experts to improve outcomes for children, youth and families.**

In order to successfully achieve these, it is critical to engage people with lived experience in ways that value their insights and do not cause harm. This handout is meant to be a tool for child welfare professionals and contains honest input (their own words) from lived experts on what is needed to engage in shared, meaningful conversation, and what you can expect from them when working together to improve and transform the child welfare system.

Why Lived Experts Are Here

- Lived Experience is expertise.
- Lived Experts bring insights that strengthen programs, policies, and practice.

What To Expect

- Lived Experts are participating as key thought partners.
- One person does not represent every experience.
- Perspectives may differ amongst lived experts.

How Child Welfare Professionals Can Best Engage in Shared Spaces

- Listen with curiosity.
- Ask respectful questions (avoid being overly intrusive).
- Avoid assumptions about anyone's background or expertise.
- Focus on learning and partnership.

Shared Expectations for All Participants

- Respect: Treat everyone with dignity, respect, and courtesy.
- Confidentiality: Information shared in session stays in the session.
- Professionalism: Engage respectfully, honor shared agreements, and contribute constructively.
- Openness to learning: Approach conversations with curiosity and a willingness to learn from others' lived experience.

Lived Experts in Their Own Words

Input was gathered directly from the Parent Leaders in Child Welfare Group (a group of parents who have had an active, open case with their local child welfare agency) and DCF Leads (DCF staff that lead LE groups).

Take us seriously and be ready to listen.

Ways to Support Lived Experts: Tangible Behaviors

- Show appreciation for our input.
- Don't avoid eye contact.
- Practice active listening and use affirmations to show you are listening.
- Allow us to finish thoughts with no interruptions. Do not minimize experiences.
- Avoid outside distractions (looking at your phones, other work, while a lived expert is sharing).

We have already been judged in our child welfare experience. Resist any social biases when coming into this space and avoid judgement.

Ways to Support Lived Experts: Tangible Behaviors

- Acknowledge what is said, even when uncomfortable.
- Do not minimize experiences (that would never happen in "my" county, "my" practice, etc.)
- Avoid placing blame "If you wouldn't have done x, then..."
- Ask for more information from us when needed (we are also experts in the child welfare system).

The systems that we have interacted with may have caused us harm. Respect the stories and experiences that we share as some of them will and could be shocking as we describe where the system went wrong and the harm that was caused.

Ways to Support Lived Experts: Tangible Behaviors

- Come prepared to accept hard or emotional topics.
- Honor when our stories shock you.
- Resist the urge to defend the system or minimize what is said or shared.
- Be open to constructive criticism.
- Be open to uncomfortable conversations because this is where people learn the most.

Demonstrate that you want to improve the system by engaging in learning with us.

Ways to Support Lived Experts: Tangible Behaviors

- Ask questions.
- Be open-minded with an attitude of curiosity.
Should be a safe space – without argument, tension, or loud voices – working toward the same goal.
- Be open to new solutions, instead of cutting off conversation.

Resource

Article: ["What Does it Look Like to Equitably Engage People with Lived Experience?"](#)

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