

Youth and Family Engagement Recommendation

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Introduction

As the Commission on Improving the Status of Children in Indiana (CISC) finalizes and implements its newest strategic plan, expanding youth engagement has been identified as a priority. In 2019, a previous Commission intern produced a report investigating the importance, options, and challenges of incorporating youth voice. This current report builds upon that one and outlines a proposed structure and some procedures necessary to promote authentic youth and family engagement. Given CISC's unique structure and process, a creative and specific approach to incorporating these voices is required and is outlined here. The writer recommends the Commission follows this outline to achieve its important goal of incorporating youth and family voice throughout the Commission's work.

Importance

Before describing the structure and procedures necessary to engage youth and family voice, it is crucial to reiterate the benefits and importance of engaging youth and families in leadership settings. While the full potential benefit of this relationship may be immeasurable, here are 3 main advantages to expanding the Commission's way of engaging youth and family voice.

Informed Policy

Engaging youth in agencies that directly affect them is a critical component to successful policy formation and programming. Nobody is better equipped to assess needs and formulate solutions for communities than those directly experiencing the topics of focus (Capacity Building Center for States, 2019).

Community Engagement

Engaging members of the community cultivates the larger community's endorsement of changes and innovations. "Solutions informed by individuals with lived experience are more likely to be implemented and sustained (National Center for State Courts, paragraph 5, 2022)."

Youth Development

In addition to leaders' obligation to share power with those they aim to aid, the personal benefit for the youth and families involved is present in a few ways. Those youth and families involved in settings like the Commission build service and advocacy capacities, problem-solving skills, and networking opportunities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012).

Background

Strategic Plan

As the previous strategic plan's timeline came to an end, members of the Commission and its executive director reassessed the Commission's structure and strategic goals. Despite some changes, recognition of the value of youth and family voice and the desire to expand its presence remained consistent and unanimous.

Policy/Funding

This recommendation outline does not require legislative change. While previous legislation and later amendment established the Commission and expanded to include 2 youth representatives, implementation of this plan requires no further legislative change. This recommendation outline also does not ask for funding, as that request has already been made through House Bill 1259. However, the plans to include more youth and family voices are contingent upon receiving funding for contracting, compensation, and staff support. If HB1259 succeeds, portions of that funding should be used to implement and facilitate the model below. If HB1259 fails, the writer recommends researching a different approach and model.

Current Setup

In short summary, the Commission process for action items and presentation goes as follows. First, the members of task forces or committees, considering their respective strategic goal, brainstorm and assess what pressing issues are relevant to their group. Next, these groups investigate, gather data, brainstorm solutions, and finalize a product to bring to the Commission. The executive committee decides if the topic will be discussed at a Commission meeting. Finally, if the topic is presented at a Commission meeting, this is where the youth voice currently becomes available. These youth Commission members, as defined in statute, are two people, on two-year terms, aged 18-29 who have lived experience in the child welfare, juvenile justice, or family/social services system¹. During meetings, they exercise their voice by asking questions during discussion and voting on action items. During the most recent strategic plan brainstorming, the current setup was critiqued. Youth voice is being incorporated too late in the process, and the voices of parents and families are absent entirely.

Task

Given the need and desire for expanding the quantity and quality of youth and family input on matters relevant to CISC, the writer's task was to research, consult, and ultimately recommend a way to do so. Integrating youth and family voice in all steps of the Commission process is necessary and achievable. Provided next is the outline with steps and characteristics that can serve as a guide for designing and starting a youth and family engagement model.

Recommended Plan

While there are many steps and things to consider that are not mentioned here, the following areas are a start and should be strongly considered when expansion occurs.

Recruitment and Facilitation

The Commission itself and its members from their respective roles have worked with different community partners that specialize in empowering youth in policy advocacy. Even with the hopeful addition of a full-time assistant and their expected assistance in the Commission process, staff time and effort are not the only barriers to authentic youth and family engagement.

¹ [Indiana Code 2018 - Indiana General Assembly, 2023 Session](#)

The other important consideration is professional qualification. To ensure the Commission is engaging with youth and families in an effective and equitable way, the writer recommends to contract with a community partner that specializes in recruiting, training, empowering, and facilitating youth and families in decision-making settings. The Commission executive director and their staff or intern would assist in this process but would lean on the expertise of the community partner.

Expanding from youth into youth and families, the writer also recommends using the same criteria currently in code for youth Commission members, minus the maximum age. This means people who have lived experience in the child welfare, juvenile justice, or family/social services system, or are a parent of someone meeting that definition, as long as they are 18 or older. Frequently in Commission discussion, reports, and goals, there is agreement that issues that affect youth also affect their families, and to intervene and aid youth, it is crucial to engage the family as well. Including families in the engagement process is a step towards inclusivity and the Commission's emphasis on a two-generation approach.

Structure

A number of different ways of engaging youth were explored in the 2019 report. For this current effort, two main structures were discussed during consultation: (1) creating a youth and family advisory group or (2) adding individuals directly to existing Commission task forces. In short summary, there are more advisory group models in existence to follow and the staff effort requirement is less, while placing individuals on each sub-group is more thorough but involves challenges of isolation and coordination (Baird, 2015).

After extensively weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each model and consulting experts in this area, including the current youth Commission members, the writer recommends incorporating both methods into one. Here, the Commission and its community partner would establish an advisory board that would meet together. The pending budget request currently accounts for 12 individuals to make up the advisory group, but this number is flexible. Commission staff would attend those meetings, and task force members would have the option to attend and ask the youth and families for feedback on their work. (This model is currently being employed by the Youth Justice Oversight Committee.) In addition, individuals within the youth and family advisory group would also have the option to attend the task force meetings of their choice. The goal here is to allow those passionate about a specific strategic goal to help shape the work of the sub-groups.

Compensation/ Evaluation

Compensating people for their time and efforts is fundamental. Currently, the Commission's youth representatives receive 75 dollars per meeting and are reimbursed for travel expenses, per statute. The writer recommends that the youth and families involved in the new advisory group and task forces receive the same compensation for their time and expenses. While the Commission's current task force members may be called "volunteers," they typically "volunteer" for the Commission on behalf of their employing agency, who is compensating their time. As the youth and families will be representing their own experiences and not a particular

agency, it will be up to the Commission to compensate them for their time, so they are on equal footing with the professionals.

Annie E. Casey Foundation (2012) provides that there is no better way to evaluate the efficacy of the youth and family engagement model and process than to hear from those participating themselves. Assuming the contracted community partner has an evaluation process in place, the Commission's executive director and staff will assist them in facilitating and receiving feedback regarding the youth and family participation experience. If not, evaluation is still crucial, and the Commission's executive director is encouraged to explore a way to facilitate feedback on the experience of the youth and families.

Recommendation Summary

While, as mentioned, not everything needed to establish the youth and family engagement model is included here, this outline should serve as a starting guide for the Commission's executive director and their staff/intern. First, contracting with a community partner for recruitment, training, and facilitation is recommended, given the Commission's limited staff capacity and the existence of deep expertise in youth engagement among some community-based organizations. Second, creating an advisory board while allowing those members to attend task force meetings of their choice is best given the Commission's unique process. And third, compensating these advisors for their time and evaluating the quality of engagement is crucial to ensuring equity. Referencing and including the aspects detailed here should set the Commission up for success as it aims to improve incorporation of youth and family perspectives in its work during all steps of its process.

References

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