

A FRAMEWORK FOR PARTNERING WITH PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

When youth and families with lived experience are viewed as partners, it is based on a respect for the unique expertise they bring and the contributions they can make to critical decisions affecting their lives. Effective partnerships between people with lived experience (PWLE) and system leaders, policymakers and service providers are based on a shared understanding of the attitudes and skills needed for shared leadership and decision-making. It creates a culture of collaboration that entails the full inclusion of their voices and expertise (integrating perceptions, experiences, and recommendations) and recognizes that PWLE are the experts on their circumstances and most knowledgeable about solutions that will benefit them.

Who are People with Lived Experience?

People with lived experience are those directly affected by social, health, public health, or other issues and by the strategies that aim to address those issues. When referring to lived experience, it means knowledge based on someone's perspective, personal identities, and history, beyond their professional or educational experience. It is their expertise gained through experience that can inform and improve systems, research, policies, practices, and programs.

In the context of systems change work, PWLE includes those impacted by youth-serving programs/systems AND the staff of those systems with lived experiences, sometimes called intersectional professionals. Intersectional professionals are people whose lives intersect with their professions, working on issues related to or driven by their lived experience. This combination of lived and professional experiences is referred to as "dual expertise." Because of their unique set of knowledge, skills, positionality, and motivations, they are oftentimes crucial to imagine and drive fundamental systems change.

Why Partner with People with Lived Experience in Systems Change Work?

There are many benefits to partnering with PWLE – they have systems and experiential knowledge, strengthen community connectedness, increase community trust, and improve systems, policy, services, and programs delivered to impacted communities. Most notably, partnering with PWLE in systems change work:

Achieves More Effective/Enduring Solutions. PWLE are experts on their own lives with critical insight into how systems should operate to effectively support them. Without shared decision-making, systems often perpetuate negative experiences and outcomes. When people with direct experience and knowledge of the fragmented youth-serving systems actively represent their own interests, the solutions are more effective, and the progress is more enduring. Simply put, the outcomes for youth and their families are better.

Advances Equity. Systems leaders, policymakers, and service providers advance equity when they value the perspectives of people they aim to support by learning from and acting on their perspectives, histories, priorities, and aspirations. They do this by:

- Forging True Partnerships. Meaningfully engaging PWLE can help break down power dynamics and build or rebuild trust. Positioning PWLE as leaders at the center of the work, not just as a resource to draw from.
- Making Decisions Collaboratively. Power-sharing with individuals and communities most affected. PWLE are at the table and actively involved in discussions and decision-making to advance systems change.
- Achieving Equitable Outcomes. Developing programs, research, approaches, and policies that meet people's needs and improve access to services and programs needed to achieve their highest potential in education, work and life.

What does Partnering with People with Lived Experience Look Like?

Meaningful engagement with PWLE includes the following components:

- Sharing Power and Decision-Making. PWLE are involved throughout the entire decision-making process, from conceptualization and planning to implementation and evaluation. Assumes everyone not only has a story that informs their thinking – not just PWLE – but everyone shares their stories in an accepting and safe environment. Recognizes and examines disparities in power that exist among system leaders, their partners, and PWLE, and explicitly addresses it. Engages PWLE as critical partners in designing, implementing, and evaluating research, programs and policies. Holds public sector leaders and other stakeholders accountable for equity-related engagement goals.
- Trust-Building and Relationships. Explicitly focuses on trust-building and honest dialogue with a trauma-informed lens. Trains everyone involved in the process to recognize structural barriers and to use strengths-based engagement methods.
- Diverse Group(s) of PWLE. Engages people directly and indirectly affected/impacted by the systems meant to serve them. Doesn't tokenize PWLE by assuming a single experience is universal or asking a single person to speak for a group rather than for themselves. Doesn't seek out PWLE who are likely to align with the beliefs of those historically around the table.
- Equitable Compensation and Other Benefits. Provides fair monetary compensation for time towards participation, travel and childcare costs, making it possible for PWLE to fully engage in the work. Compensation for other benefits, including skills development, professional development, authorship credit or acknowledgement in papers, reports and presentations, and connection to resources.
- Accessibility and Orientation. Engages PWLE in accessible ways – plain language, content tailored to relevant cultural contexts by recognizing diverse values, beliefs, and communication styles across cultures – and defines clear expectations, roles, and limitations of the partnership. Ensures an organized process for orienting PWLE and creates a welcoming environment to build relationships and confidence. There isn't the expectation that PWLE have professional training, rather it provides training and support for effective participation.
- Preparation and Support: Connect with PWLE to co-create and/or review meeting/event agendas and provide context on different agenda items and terms, and to strengthen their understanding of the subject matter. Support PWLE in understanding their role and ensuring they have the support in place to be meaningfully engaged and contribute during meetings.

Debrief with PWLE after meetings/events to see what went well, what could be improved and identify any next steps. Help problem solve through barriers to participation, including any language childcare, transportation, or clothing barriers, etc.

This overview is adapted from the following resources:

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). Engaging People with Lived Experience to Improve Federal Research, Policy, and Practice [site](#)
 - What is Lived Experience? [pdf](#)
 - Methods and Emerging Strategies to Engage People with Lived Experience, Improving Federal Research, Policy, and Practice. [pdf](#)
 - What Does it Look Like to Equitably Engage People with Lived Experience? [pdf](#)
 - Strategies for National and State Groups to Equitably Identify People with Lived Experience. [pdf](#)
 - Recruiting Individuals with Lived Experience. [pdf](#)
- Anthony Barrows, Managing Partner and Founding Director, Center for Behavioral Design and Social Justice/Network of Intersectional Professionals, an Initiative of Project Evident. [site](#)
- Annie E. Casey Foundation
 - A Framework for Effectively Partnering with Young People. [pdf](#)
 - Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide. [pdf](#)
 - Authentic Youth Engagement: Youth-Adult Partnerships. [pdf](#)
- Anthony Barrows, Managing Partner and Founding Director, Center for Behavioral Design and Social Justice/Network of Intersectional Professionals. [site](#)
- Ladder of Participation/Engagement.
- International Association for Public Participation, Spectrum of Public Participation. [pdf](#)
- Urban Institute, Youth Engagement in Collective Impact Initiatives. [pdf](#)
- Chapin Hall, Authentic Youth Engagement within Organizations: What Does it Look Like in Practice? [pdf](#)