



THE VALUE OF INCLUDING INDIVIDUALS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

The Purpose of Upstream

Upstream is a community-based approach that leverages judicial resources, court leadership, child welfare agency partnership, and state, local and, community stakeholder engagement to collaboratively develop a plan of action that aims to strengthen communities, prevent child maltreatment and out-of-home

placement, reduce court involvement, and support safe and healthy families. The Upstream framework is grounded in a prevention mindset with the ultimate goal of providing every family the community-based supports they need to have safe and healthy outcomes.

Upstream Values Engaging Individuals with Lived Experience

Upstream recommends including individuals with lived experience on planning teams, mapping workshops, and implementation teams. Individuals with lived experience may include parents, children, kinship providers, and foster parents. Families touched by child welfare and court systems have a unique insight into the resources and supports needed to create thriving families. People who have been involved in these systems know what it feels like to move through a system, to be scrutinized, and to be expected to comply with others' requirements. They know what helped them and what would have helped them. Because of this, families should be engaged throughout the entire process as partners to co-create systems improvements.

Every community has a range of agencies, organizations, and systems tasked with providing the resources and supports families need to thrive. Too often, the effectiveness of these entities is limited by inequitable service availability and accessibility, lack of coordination and collaboration, and inadequate community engagement. This results in missed opportunities to identify and address risk factors before child welfare or court involvement. Including individuals with lived experience throughout the Upstream process

provides the opportunity to identify and address those missed opportunities and enriches the collaborative process.

Critical Role of Individuals with Lived Experience

Individuals with lived experience play a critical role in system improvement efforts. Their personal experiences provide a tangible glimpse of how community resources and system processes interface. Incorporating their perspectives throughout systems improvement efforts enables communities to effectively design processes and deliver services that best meet the actual needs of children and families.

Meaningfully including individuals with lived experience also fosters the larger community's endorsement of changes and innovations. Solutions informed by individuals with lived experience are more likely to be implemented and sustained.

Acknowledging Challenges for Engagement

System professionals demonstrate a deep commitment to creating communities where all families thrive when they invite recipients of system services to the table. The willingness of system actors to include those with lived experience

comes with the responsibility to do so actively, with intention, and ready to share power.

Families who have been involved in systems may not see the systems in a favorable light. Their perceptions of the system, based in historical narratives or personal experience, may cause them to be hesitant to engage and slow to trust the intentions of the system actors to include them. System professionals need to be aware and sensitive to these perceptions.

These perceptions interact with the power differentials that often exist between system professionals and system consumers. There will be race and gender dynamics, varying levels of education, and different socioeconomic statuses. Because of this, system professionals must carefully cultivate an environment where those with lived experience feel welcome, accepted, and safe to share and contribute.

Strategies for Meaningful Engagement

Recognizing and respecting the valuable contributions of individuals with lived experience begins with inviting them to fully participate as a member of a group. Identifying individuals to participate should be a deliberate process to ensure voices represent the diversity of the community and experiences within child welfare and justice systems. Child welfare agencies may already have connections to youth or parent groups, and these groups may be willing to participate in collaborative efforts. To engage a broader range of voices, consider connecting with a third party, such as a local service provider, to identify additional individuals who are open to participating.

To amplify as many voices as possible, be flexible in the frequency, mode, and opportunities for

individuals with lived experience to participate. Most people participate in systems improvement efforts as a part of their job; someone with lived experience may not be in that same position. Offering opportunities around working hours, providing daycare or transportation, and compensating their time and expertise are important considerations in including the voices of those with lived experience.

Once individuals are identified and agree to participate, prepare them in advance of any meeting they attend; share the agenda for the meeting, describe the other attendees, and talk through how they can contribute. Assure individuals that they are more than their lived experience and that all of their contributions are valuable. They should not be asked to share their story as part of their participation.

Finally, support continued engagement throughout the process, from exploring challenges and opportunities through implementing and assessing improvements. Be authentic and transparent in incorporating their contributions and adopting their recommendations. Allow them to easily see how their participation was valued and made a difference.

Conclusion

Individuals who have been involved in the child welfare or court system have a unique and valuable perspective that is critically important to the Upstream process of examining the community's ability to meet the needs of children and families. It is the responsibility of Upstream professionals to create a welcoming and inclusive environment where individuals are able to participate in a way that both honors their lived experience and values their contribution as a group member.



**Strengthening Children and Families through
Prevention and Intervention Strategies:**
A COURT AND COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH