

PROGRAM QUALITY ROADMAP

This overview summarizes the elements of Root Cause’s Program Quality Roadmap, a proven system for building equity and excellence in social service organizations, including descriptions of each of the Core Components of Quality below.

Core Components of Quality



PROGRAM ACCESSIBILITY: How do programs address barriers to participation to ensure community members can receive needed services regardless of zip code, race, gender, language spoken, disability, work schedule, household income, and other factors?

REFERRALS & PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT: How do programs give and receive referrals and manage partnerships that lead to seamless service coordination between programs?

STAFF SUPPORT & PERFORMANCE: How do programs support their staff to promote their well-being and enable them to provide the most effective services to participants?

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE: How are programs designed to identify and address the consequences of trauma?

DATA & MEASUREMENT CAPACITY: How does a program collect and use data to measure performance and progress towards goals and outcomes?

EVIDENCE-INFORMED PROGRAM DESIGN: How do providers use evidence-based models and available research to best meet the needs of participants?

FAMILY & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: How are participants involved in the planning, design, leadership, feedback processes, and evaluations of programs designed to serve them?

Foundational Conditions

Organizational commitment to racial & economic equity. Structural racism and growing income and wealth disparities in the US mean that communities of color and those struggling to make ends meet are vastly overrepresented in populations receiving social services. High quality cannot be achieved, therefore, without a strong and explicit organization-wide commitment to racial and economic equity that translates into everyday practices for supporting these marginalized communities towards stability and wellbeing.

Organizational mission & vision are driven by an authentic understanding of community needs and strengths. A respectful and trusting relationship with the service population shapes the core of the organization’s purpose and intended impact.

Alignment between organizational mission & vision and Program Outcomes, such as in a theory of change or logic model, are foundational for high quality services. Organizational mission & vision are ultimately what quality services aim to achieve, and strong program outcomes are both the result of high quality services and a measure of quality improvement successes.

Organizational & leadership supports supply tangible and intangible resources that are necessary for high quality services. These resources include funding, commitment from leaders, physical space and materials, and billing and accounting functions, among many others. These supports enable programs to serve their community, and when they are absent program quality suffers as a result.



INTRODUCTION

Excellent social service providers recognize that there are no greater experts on the needs and strengths of their service population than the members of this population themselves. Family and community engagement is the process of seeking out this expertise and refers to the systematic inclusion of families and the broader community in an organization's leadership, research, planning, development, implementation, and evaluation. In family and community-centered programs, traditional caregiver roles such as program helpers are transformed into creative roles in which families partner with staff to establish goals and make decisions related to the programs. This also includes roles for caregivers to support one another, such as through peer mentorship programs or family partner positions in which a person with experience participating in a particular type of service provides support and advocacy for a person who is new to the system. Additionally, those programs understand the community context that their families live and participate in and include members of that community in visioning and decision-making processes. Providers recognize that "community" includes their staff and volunteers and have a mentality of "we serve each other" rather than "we serve them."

The practice of engaging families and communities, regardless of context, is a key component to advancing equity, increasing access to services, and reducing disparities in service delivery and outcomes. Through active and dynamic forms of family and community engagement, families and their communities share power and responsibility with program staff, which leads to improved parent/caregiver-child, parent/caregiver-program relationships, and program-community relationships resulting in improved program efficacy. Research shows that effective family and community engagement lessens the gap between family needs and services provided, improves the quality of service provision, and enhances a system's overall capacity to support families.

To be truly impactful, engagement must be multi-faceted and incorporate strategies for engaging people in many different ways so as to reach a variety of participants. For instance, providers may receive low engagement from fathers using typical engagement strategies that most often generate responses from mothers or other primary caregivers. However, in comparison to children with uninvolved fathers, research reveals that children with involved, caring fathers are substantially more likely to do well in school, have high self-esteem, and demonstrate positive social behaviors. Therefore, finding approaches for successfully engaging fathers when safe and appropriate for the family can substantially improve program outcomes and effectiveness.



Community and family engagement includes partnership and collaboration with those served and their families and also encompasses a broader approach to inclusion and collaboration. Additional aspects of this work include:

- Coordinating with any other organizations that serve the same population.
- Working with people and organizations in the physical surrounding space where the population served lives, works, or spends time.
- Working with those in the physical surrounding space of where the social service provider is located.
- Partnering with individuals, organizations, and/or businesses that have an interest in service provision for the population served.

Family and community engagement practices are, by necessity, very context-specific. Effective approaches are designed with and for the unique population the organization seeks to serve and is responsive to their needs and strengths, as well as the resources and other influential factors that exist (or don't) within the community. This program quality brief offers a working definition of family and community engagement, best practices, and a case study of success in this core component of quality.

STRONG FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT LOOKS LIKE...

Building a strong foundation

Organizations with strong family and community engagement have institutionalized their capacity for and commitment to building strong relationships with families and their communities. This includes incorporating family and community engagement in their organizational vision of success while also bolstering the structures in place to communicate and engage with families and members of the community on an individual basis. Best practices for building a strong foundation include:



1. **Assessing the quality** of any existing family and community engagement activities and what capacity exists to build upon or strengthen these activities.



2. **Setting a clear vision** with a plan to enable and encourage staff, families, and community members to work together.¹ This includes ensuring their ability to communicate through multiple forms to reach families and community members (including written, face-to-face, and online communication).² This vision should be communicated with staff and community members for input and revision.

3. **Providing professional development** for staff to build cultural competency among staff and make cultural competency an integral component in their hiring process.³ When staff have the capacity and skills to interrupt prejudice within themselves and with their colleagues and to recognize systemic barriers and how they impact a service participant's ability to receive timely, high-quality support, they are better equipped to insulate service participants from these negative experiences. Staff can avoid unknowingly causing harm when interacting with participants from other cultures and are better able to create a welcoming and respectful environment for families.⁴
 - **The capacity to understand and interact effectively with people from different cultures is known as cultural competency.** Multiculturally competent providers possess:
 1. An understanding of their own culture on a basic level. (It's tough to comprehend another culture if you don't know your own!)
 2. A desire to learn about other people's cultural practices and worldviews.
 3. Respect for cultural differences, as well as a positive attitude toward cultures that are not familiar.

 - **Cultural awareness training for health workers is now standard practice in a wide range of industries.** Cultural competency, cultural safety, cultural humility, and cultural intelligence are some of the alternative and overlapping adaptations that have developed as a result of meeting this important need (including diversity training, anti-racism training, micro-aggression training).

 - **Resources to help staff improve cultural competency are widely available.** For instance, the [US Department of Health and Human Services' Think Cultural Health Program](#)⁵ offers



a free online continuing education training course for mental health practitioners to promote cultural competency.

4. **Prioritizing family and community engagement in the budgeting** of funds, staff capacity and time management, and in the amount and distribution of resources devoted to families.⁵ Organizations strong in this area ensure long-term sustainability by embedding the funding, time, and other resources needed to do family and community engagement into the planning and operations of their organizations year after year. This ensures staff flexibility to build relationships with families and the community and to support their full participation. Sustainability allows these relationships to grow and deepen over time.
5. **Building connections and coalitions** with organizations, public agencies, policy makers, and other social service providers in the community (and, if it is different, the community served).⁶
6. **Recruiting, supporting, and promoting staff whose identities and experiences reflect those of the community served.** In other words, organizations who excel at family and community engagement hire the experts and understand that their expertise strengthens services across the organization.



Cultivating deep affinity with and understanding of the community served

1. **Engaging in organizational learning about the families and communities served.** Organizing surveys and focus groups⁷, frequenting popular venues in the community, and mapping the effects of systems within the community are all ways to gain a deeper understanding of the families that programs seek to serve while building lasting relationships across the community.⁸ Where resources allow, organizations should also conduct landscape analyses of the community periodically to understand what resources are already available and who may be providing similar or interrelated services to the same population.⁹ Often, multiple organizations are able to partner on the same needs assessment, allowing more programs to benefit and distributing the cost across agencies. Engaging in community needs assessments are another way to assess how an organization can better serve its participants and reach the broader community.¹⁰ This practice also acknowledges that families



and community members are integral partners and necessary co-designers to improve service provision for communities.

- 2. Actively pursuing equity and culturally responsive practices** to help programs build deeper affinity with participants and the community.¹¹ As staff become proficient in these practices, families begin to recognize their voices are valued and their experiences are valid.¹² This allows a more open and welcoming environment for families to participate and communicate in discussions about program improvement and ways to further support the community.¹³
- 3. Recognizing and addressing internal biases** on an ongoing basis in order to avoid reproducing these biases in service provision and thereby harming participants.¹⁴ Program teams can get started by using racial bias self-assessments, engaging in racial equity or implicit bias reduction trainings, and participating in organization-wide learning and evaluation efforts, among many other opportunities. Organizations can engage families and community leaders in these conversations to gain additional perspective about where the organization most needs to focus. Learning about bias and being able to recognize it in oneself or others is an important first step, which must then be followed by concrete tools and strategies for altering behavior so that it is not unconsciously reproducing this bias. This is an ongoing process for each staff member and the organization as a whole, and requires open communication with participants to learn about what is working and what is not. Including families and community members in these conversations allows organizations to improve their service provision while also deepening relationships.



Uplifting families and community members as integral partners and co-designers

Strong family and community engagement acknowledges that families and community members are the experts in deciding what they need and that families and communities own their experiences. Leveraging that expertise by bringing families and community members into the decision-making and design processes allows organizations to make more informed and effective choices to address needs through service delivery. Best practices for uplifting families and community members as integral partners and co-designers include:

- 1. Recognizing that families are experts** and active agents in their own lives; and are therefore essential partners in the creation of functioning, high-quality service provision.¹⁵ High-quality programs prioritize seeking the input of families throughout all stages of design and decision-making processes.¹⁶ This means organizations don't



make decisions about program design, services offered, and other significant changes without input from - and ideally collaboration with - members of the service population.

2. **Transparently providing access to information** that allows participants to fully engage in and influence decision-making.¹⁷ This could include sharing relevant studies about interventions, presenting organizational data and outcomes, making meeting notes available online and in different languages when necessary, as well as creating opportunities for family representatives to participate with a formal role on committees or boards with defined structures. This also means making sure language is clear, barriers to participation are mitigated, families know their role in a space, and all parties know the expected takeaways and next steps from a meeting.
3. **Building in learning opportunities and leadership development** to build the skills and opportunities for participants and families to advocate for their needs.¹⁸ When families and community members feel more equipped to participate in the organization's work, in addition to feeling welcomed and respected, they will be more likely to join in and contribute to achieving shared goals for the community. Additionally, this will allow participants to strengthen their ability to advocate for themselves and the community in other critical conversations and spaces, such as in advocacy campaigns or state-level policy conversations.
4. **Inviting families and community members to participate in a program advisory group** or a formal role on organizational committees or boards. In these invitations, organizations should include clear parameters for engagement and any resources families or community members may need access to in order to fully participate in conversations and contribute to decision-making.¹⁹
5. **Offering compensation to participants** who share their time and expertise in the service of improving the organization. Compensation recognizes the value that participants are contributing to the organization and can also alleviate a barrier to participation for families and community members who might otherwise choose not to attend due to financial constraints. Compensating participants may not be appropriate for all family and community engagement activities (such as surveys or town-hall gatherings), but should be considered in consultation with a community advisory board to determine where it is needed and how best to provide it.

Monitoring and Adjusting Family Engagement Activities

Successful organizations incorporate feedback from families and communities in program improvement and service delivery continuously. Organizations can then continue to advance services toward their vision and goals, while also



building and maintaining relationships with families and communities. Best Practices for monitoring and adjusting family and community engagement activities include:

- 1. Creating learning feedback loops** and continuously improving their services and their family and community engagement activities based on that feedback.²⁰ Using qualitative and quantitative data to measure the impact of family and community engagement efforts, program teams can learn about successes and areas for improvement and should share those findings with families. This can be in the form of periodic interviews with community members and families or regularly scheduled surveys distributed to them to determine the successes and challenges they face while engaging with this program.
- 2. Maintaining accountability to goals** co-created with families and community members.²¹ Organizational staff should create goals at the beginning of their relationship with families and community members and assess with them if the organization is making significant progress toward those goals periodically. Goals will include what the community aims to achieve through participating in program services, such as improvement in child development milestones, learning supportive parenting practices, and reaching other outcomes that address the family's needs.
- 3. Adjusting feedback processes to reach as many participants and community members as possible – beyond those that are regularly engaged.** For instance, some organizations encounter challenges with engaging fathers in their services and have found success through targeted outreach strategies for days found the in the case study below.

CASE STUDY

The Early Learning Lab, Parent Innovation Institute, The Unity Council

The Unity Council in Oakland, CA, wanted to increase fathers' engagement in their child's early learning through improving the quality of the organization's family engagement activities. In 2017, the Unity Council participated in the Early Learning Lab's Parent Innovation Institute in Oakland, CA to increase the participation in their "Day with Daddy" event, where fathers and their children play and work on creative activities together. A key aspect of the Parent Innovation Institute's framework and approach



was to begin working toward an identified goal by connecting with the community to explore the issue and define it from the perspective of community members. For the Unity Council, this meant working in partnership with the Early Learning Lab to conduct surveys and interviews with fathers, mothers, other community members, and their staff members to discuss the barriers to father engagement in the community. They also conducted observations at their community Head Start centers to understand the community's parental involvement in children's early learning. This led the team to better understand the barriers preventing some fathers from engaging in their child's early learning. An important insight gleaned from these interviews was that mothers often acted as a "gatekeeper," which defined and limited the fathers' involvement with their children.

The Unity Council team decided to reframe their "Day with Daddy" programming while also working with families to ease some of the "gatekeeping" taking place in the community. Program updates included the development of a "Mommy's Waiting Group," to give mothers time to practice self-care and build community while the fathers attended "Day with Daddy" with their children. The team also created "Daddy's Promise," which fathers signed and kept as a reminder of why they were participating and also served to assure mothers that they were there to partner with them to support their child's development. They continued to gather parent feedback on a regular basis. Following these adjustments the attendance of fathers quadrupled. Additionally, families reported increased engagement and improved relationships between fathers and their children.

In this example, The Unity Council cultivated deep affinity with the community, uplifted parents and community members as co-designers and partners, and monitored and adjusted their programming according to parent and family feedback. As a result, they saw increased participation in their programming and the creation of stronger partnerships throughout their community.





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