

Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health
FAMILY LEADERSHIP IN SYSTEMS EVALUATION
TIP SHEET
ENGAGING NEW FAMILIES IN EVALUATION

Challenge:

Some System of Care Communities are experiencing difficulty finding family members that are interested in evaluation activities and willing to participate in training and/or technical assistance opportunities.

Background:

The Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children, Youth and their Families Program calls for family involvement in evaluation activities, which may include “*providing feedback on the design and objectives of the evaluation, conducting interviews, analyzing data, and interpreting and reporting results.*”¹

The Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health evaluation training initiative began in the late 1990's. Two basic challenges that quickly emerged are still relevant today. Strategies to engage new families in evaluation should be attentive to these.

1. **HISTORICAL TRAUMA** related to abuse brought on certain peoples through research and evaluation. Generation to generation, many families remember the harm caused their people through studies such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment or, more recently, a Johns Hopkins University study which exposed young children to lead based paint. Anger and distrust runs high among many families and precludes their willingness to engage with evaluation activities.
2. **CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES** between families and the highly technical, academic world of evaluators.

Families raising children with serious emotional, behavioral, or mental problems fulfill the most important, life-long role in the lives of their children. They are busy. Their lives are subject to interruption by the needs of their child. If they are to focus on system of care activities, those activities need to be worth their while. Those activities need to result in information or other practical kinds of resources that are useful and relevant to the every day lives of families.

Families whose children have transitioned to adult-age, who have lost their children to the system, or whose children have died may be more available to systems. Their specialized expertise may include long term experience advocating for themselves and other families, developing family run organizations, or providing training and technical assistance to developing systems of care.

Outreach and engagement strategies to families, with children at home or not, should be respectful, relevant, and useful. It should never add additional burden on time or resources. Families sharing their time, their knowledge, and their experience deserve to be properly compensated.



Core Strategies:

- Apply adult learning principles to all information sharing
- Acknowledge the history that includes abuses in the name of research. “He who protests too much...” is a good phrase to keep in mind. It is not useful to defend yourself as a good evaluator. It is far more helpful to acknowledge history and allow people to express their anger and their trauma. Then, you can move to new ground together.
- Help families learn the language of evaluation and cultural nuances of the evaluators’ work world.
- Help families know that their participation can, at least
 - Help to protect their families and communities from disrespect or harm
 - Help them be more effective advocates
 - Help to improve services and supports for children and their families

Creative Strategies:

- Ask to attend existing support groups or other meetings where families are already gathered. Go to them.
- Post information where families will see it. For example, in waiting rooms, PTO newsletters, Laundromats, community bulletin boards, or food markets. Offer to provide information for family-organization newsletters. Natural community/family member leaders may be found in places like churches, homeless shelters, or cultural centers.
- Sponsor an event for families with food and childcare. Something that will help take the pressure off families for just a while. And, entertain them with useful and exciting information gleaned from the national evaluation. Involve families in planning the event.
- Show families interesting facts about their community in pie charts created out of pizza or bar charts created out of vials of colored water.
- Demonstrate that families’ voices are heard, honored and responded to. Show families what they say does indeed have an impact on the system of care.
- Present useful findings about systems of care in easy to understand format. USA Today graphics provide an example.
- Demonstrate how the use of evaluation findings can improve advocacy efforts.
- Present information about the influence families can have on systems accountability.
- Show families how the use of evaluation findings can support their request for specific services and supports for their child and family.
- Demonstrate how data can improve decision-making about services and supports.
- Train and support several family leaders to introduce the value of evaluation to other families in the community.

In Conclusion:

New learnings continue to emerge from System of Care communities dedicated to family-driven evaluation. Strategies for the engagement and support of families and youth to apply their specialized expertise are growing. In addition, training and technical assistance to help families and youth gain necessary evaluation skills are available through the Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health. Please contact Elaine Slaton with comments on this TIP SHEET or to learn more about available training and technical assistance. H[Eslaton@FFCMH.org](mailto:ESlaton@FFCMH.org)

^{i i} 2003, RFA No. SMA-03-009 and 2005, CFDA No. 93.104 issued by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration of the federal Health and Human Services.

