

A Human-Centered Design Approach for TANF and Child Welfare Partnering for Prevention

A growing body of evidence shows the important role that Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs can play in decreasing the risk of child neglect and physical abuse investigations.ⁱ TANF programs provide direct cash assistance to families, along with various other economic and concrete supports (such as child care and transportation benefits), which alleviate families' difficulties in meeting their basic needs. When families have more supports and resources, economic and material hardship is reduced, and the risk of child abuse and neglect is lower.ⁱⁱ

This evidence suggests that state, Tribal, and local human services agencies have strong incentives to create opportunities for collaboration between TANF and Child Welfare/Protective Services programs in the interest of preventing families' involvement with the Child Welfare system. Yet, in many jurisdictions, TANF and Child Welfare programs may engage in little to no collaboration due to organizational silos and/or institutional barriers to cooperation.

How might TANF and Child Welfare programs generate collaboration?

TANF and Child Welfare programs can use **human-centered design (HCD)** to explore possibilities for collaboration and design new strategies for engaging in prevention work. HCD is a mindset and a process that focuses on deeply understanding the end user to address complex problems in an innovative way.ⁱⁱⁱ For TANF and Child Welfare, end users are the children and families served by their programs.

This brief guide describes three activities rooted in HCD that any state, Tribal, or local agency can use to strengthen partnerships between TANF and Child Welfare with the goal of lowering families' risk of involvement with the Child Welfare system.

Before you get started, hear from families!

Elevating and incorporating family voices is a cornerstone of HCD. For each of the activities described in this brief, consider how you might directly involve the families that you serve in the process. Alternatively, you can set up listening sessions or conduct a survey to hear directly from families about their experiences. These engagements will provide vital information about the lived experiences of your families that your team should consider when completing these activities.

Consider holding a listening session with six to eight families and ask them questions such as:

1. What has your overall experience been with this program?
2. What parts of the program have been most helpful to you? Why?
3. Are there any areas of the program you find challenging or difficult to navigate? Why?
4. What are your interactions with our staff like?
5. How does participating in this program make you feel?
6. To what extent does this program meet your needs and expectations?
7. How would you describe success for yourself in this program?
8. How can we create a better experience for you and other families in the program?

Activity 1. Build empathy for families.

Before building new prevention-focused collaborations between TANF and Child Welfare or creating new prevention initiatives, start by seeking to better understand the experiences of families served by these programs. This is the all-important step of empathy-building, which is a cornerstone of HCD's emphasis on ensuring that end users' perspectives shape the solutions to complex problems.^{iv} An **empathy map** is a terrific way to accomplish

this. Empathy mapping is the process of respectfully documenting and synthesizing the experiences of a group of people in terms of their behaviors, emotions, thoughts, needs, and hopes. An empathy map should be grounded in direct feedback from families about their experiences—for example, through surveys, listening sessions, or interviews.

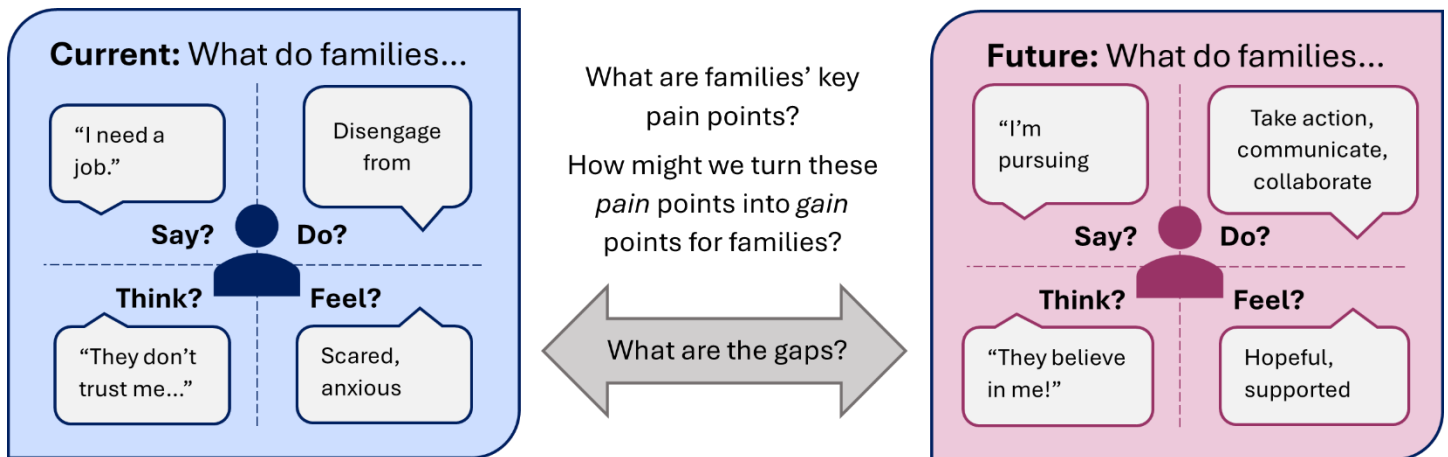
Two kinds of empathy maps: Current and future

Generally, an empathy map is meant to represent the *current* experiences of families. But it can be helpful to take this a step further by generating another kind of empathy map—one that represents the *future* (aspirational) experiences of families. This two-step approach to empathy mapping clarifies and highlights the gap between the ideal state and reality, bringing opportunities to make a change and improve families' experiences to the surface.

Step-by-step guidance for Empathy Mapping

1. **Convene a team.** Start by pulling together program leaders and direct service staff from both TANF and Child Welfare. This team will work through the process of gathering data, developing empathy maps, and making sense of what is learned through these activities. An empathy map can be completed in one session (about 60 minutes).
2. **Gather data.** Before summarizing families' experiences on an empathy map, ask them about their experiences in TANF and/or Child Welfare. Although direct service staff have valid perspectives on families' experiences from their frequent interactions, there is no substitute for hearing directly from families. Data gathering can be carried out through a brief survey (such as a Google Form, Microsoft Forms, or SurveyMonkey); by convening a listening session over lunch or in the evening; or by conducting one-on-one interviews. Consider selecting a group of families to be surveyed or invited to listening sessions; you might also consider methods to ensure a diverse range of experiences and identities are represented. Some families will only have experience with one program (TANF or Child Welfare), whereas other families will have experience with both programs. Each of these perspectives could be beneficial to learn from.
3. **Map the current experience of families.** Work as a team to summarize families' feedback and synthesize the themes of families' current experiences into four categories by asking: *What do families currently say, do, think, and feel?* Try to document five to eight summary statements in each of those four categories. Consider noting which statements relate to TANF, Child Welfare, or to both programs. These statements will likely be a mix of positives and negatives. If not, it may be worth considering whether you are getting a complete picture of family perspectives and whether potential bias has crept in and skewed the picture positively or negatively.
4. **Map the desired future experience of families.** Next, pivot to the future and work as a team to summarize and synthesize families' perspectives into the same four categories: *In the future, what do we hope families say, do, think, and feel?* Again, try to document five to eight summary statements for each of the four categories. Consider noting which statements relate to TANF, Child Welfare, or to both programs. These statements will generally be positive and aspirational.
5. **Compare the two maps and explore opportunities for change.** With both maps completed, review them side by side as a team. What are the most noticeable differences and gaps? Reflecting on the current empathy map, ask: *What are families' key pain points? How might we build on and sustain the positive experiences of families?* Reflecting on the future empathy map, ask: *How might we turn these pain points into positive experiences for families?* (See Exhibit A.) These questions should lead the team from a place of reflection to a conversation about concrete possibilities for change.

Exhibit A. Comparing current and future empathy maps



Activity 2. Map the partners who serve families.

In addition to the experiences of families, it is important to also consider the roles of TANF and Child Welfare staff—how they currently and in the past have related to one another, worked together, or collaborated; the distinct roles they play in service delivery; and the distinct and shared perspectives they have on partnering for the purpose of prevention. A helpful strategy for exploring these questions is to create a **partner map**,¹ which visually depicts the relationships and perspectives among the relevant parties. Partner mapping identifies (1) all relevant organizations and groups that deliver services to families engaged with TANF and Child Welfare programs; (2) the connections and relationships between these organizations and groups; and (3) the key perspectives these organizations and groups hold regarding partnership for the purpose of preventing families' involvement in the Child Welfare system.

Step-by-step guidance

1. **Convene a team.** Start by convening program leaders and staff from both TANF and Child Welfare. This may or may not be the same team that worked through the empathy map activity together. This team should have a good understanding—across both TANF and Child Welfare—of all organizations and groups that interact with or support families in these systems. The partner map exercise should be completed in one session (about 60 minutes).
2. **Brainstorm and identify relevant partners.** As a team, agree on broad criteria for who you would consider to be a current or prospective partner in efforts to prevent families' involvement in the Child Welfare system. This might be something like: "Any service organization or group in our state/county/community that serves households eligible for TANF or that is in any way engaged with Child Welfare." Invite members of the team to independently brainstorm as many relevant organizations and groups as possible. This exercise often leads to the identification of potential partners that members of the team had not thought of before (for example, child care providers, schools, faith-based programs, etc.).

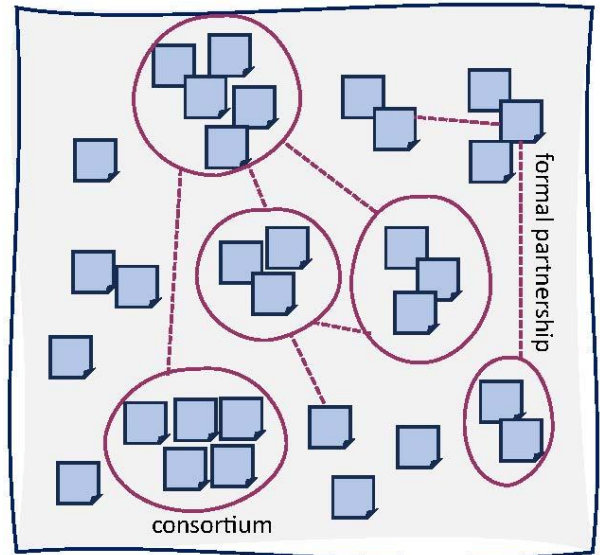
Tips for success

- ✓ Don't limit yourselves to formal partners; think broadly about any organizations that serve the same families.
- ✓ Consider including potential partners—those with whom you have not yet worked but might in the future.

¹ This activity is commonly known as a "stakeholder map." Consistent with the spirit and intent of this brief, we use the term "partner" instead of "stakeholder."

For this part of the activity, consider giving each person a stack of sticky notes and invite them to write down one organization/group per sticky note. Once everyone has had a chance to independently brainstorm, invite each person to share their sticky notes. Combine identical ones and post the consolidated set on a large, blank piece of poster paper.

Exhibit B. Making connections on your map



3. **Define the connections and relationships among partners.** Having identified current and prospective partners, consider the connections between them and the relationships among them, including how (if at all) these organizations relate to yours. Visually, you can do this by arranging the sticky notes on the poster paper into clusters, drawing lines around and between clusters, and annotating these lines with brief labels. For example, Exhibit B illustrates how your partner map might begin to take shape.

Work to have your map become an accurate picture of the complex network of service organizations in your service delivery ecosystem. Remember that this map should reflect your current reality. Toward the end of the exercise, you will have the opportunity to explore opportunities for building new partnerships and strengthening existing ones.

4. **Capture the key perspectives of partners.** As a team, consider the unique perspectives that each organization and/or cluster holds regarding partnering on a current or prospective prevention effort. To do this with accuracy, you will probably need to gather additional data (for example, through a listening session, interview, or survey) about these organizations’ perspectives—especially those with which you don’t have existing relationships. Try to objectively and faithfully represent these perspectives based on what you learn. For example: “we step in to help alleviate crises,” or “we equip and empower parents to safely care for their children,” or “we don’t have the resources for prevention activities with the general population.” In some cases, organizations may be represented by multiple (even competing) perspectives on the issue of prevention.

The purpose of this step is to add a deeper layer of analysis and understanding of the partners and their relationships by actively taking into account their perspectives. This continues and reinforces the theme of empathy-building that was the focus of Activity 1, but oriented toward those who serve and support families.

5. **Review your map, ask questions, and consider what it might look like in the future.** As a team, step back and review your map. Brainstorm and pose questions about it. For example: *Which relationships are strongest? Which are weakest? Which partners are our champions? Where might we want to focus to better reach families we struggle to engage with for purposes of prevention?* The more questions you ask, the more your team will generate ideas and possibilities for what you might want your partner map to look like. In fact, ask and reflect on this question: *How would we like to see this map change in six months, a year, or even three years?*

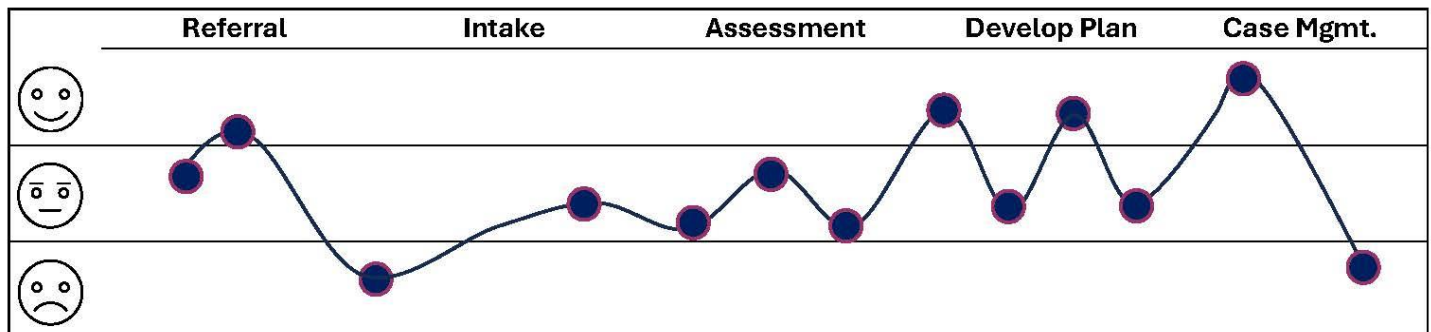
Activity 3. Explore program experiences.

Having started with an empathy-building exercise for families and then mapping the relevant organizations that serve families, a helpful next step is to consider the experience families have when they engage with your programs. This is often referred to as a **journey map**, which is meant to document both the steps people take and the experiences people have. You might consider developing more than one journey map—perhaps one for TANF and one for Child Welfare programming.

Step-by-step guidance

1. **Convene a team.** There are a few different ways to create the team for this exercise. One option is to bring together a diverse group of individuals (different communities, backgrounds, and identities) who have experienced TANF and Child Welfare programs and can authentically help create a journey map that reflects their experiences. Another option is to bring together staff who work directly with families and who can represent their experiences; this approach is likely to be more efficient and less complicated but may not fully and authentically reflect what families would say themselves. Ideally, the journey map exercise will be completed in one session (about 60 to 90 minutes).
2. **Identify the phases and key steps.** An individual's experience with TANF or Child Welfare programs can likely be divided into general phases (for example, referral, intake, assessment, plan development, and case management). Every step should represent a touchpoint, key output, decision, or transaction. Work together as a team to identify these phases and key steps that represent the common program experience. Ideally, the team can plot this on several pieces of large poster paper affixed to a wall.
3. **Assess the experience at each step.** For each step on your map, work as a group to sum up or represent the collective experience at each step. In some cases, the group will be in full agreement; in other cases, there will be differences of opinion. This is okay! Document instances where there is consensus or variation about the experience. Consider plotting the experience using a visual diagram (as shown in Exhibit C, below) of your journey map. For each plot point (representing a step within a phase), label it with the group's description of the experience (positive, negative, neutral, or mixed).

Exhibit C. Visualizing the experience on a journey map



4. **Review your map, ask questions, and consider what it might look like in the future.** As a team, step back and review the journey map. Brainstorm and pose questions about it. For example: *What are the high points? What are the low points? Why? What part of the journey sticks with families the most? What might we do differently to shift more of the experience into the positive? Where in the journey might we do more prevention work?* The more questions you ask, the more the group will generate ideas and possibilities for what the journey map might look like in the future. In fact, ask and reflect on this question: *How would we like to see this map change in six months, a year, or even three years?*

Make partnering for prevention a reality

As your team works through each of the three activities described in this brief, you will generate valuable data about the families you serve, the organizations in your service delivery systems that serve them, and their experiences with your programs. This information is a great starting point for considering ways TANF and Child Welfare can collaborate with a focus on prevention. Step back and consider these reflection questions:

- What is our top insight from each activity? What did we learn?
- What are two or three changes we could get started on quickly to enhance our prevention partnering?

- How could these changes make a difference for families?
- How might these changes prevent families from being involved in the Child Welfare system?

There are important benefits to using an HCD approach to TANF and Child Welfare prevention driven partnerships. An HCD approach can support inclusive goal setting and collaborations to directly learn from families, staff, and agencies. This approach can produce a shared vision and generate an action plan for what you can accomplish together with the goal of partnering for prevention.

References

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