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Section 1:  
Structuring  
Meetings to be  
Family & Youth  
Friendly

## Structuring Meetings to be Family and Youth Friendly

Board meeting attendance is more consistent when the meetings are accessible, well structured, and provide adequate information for participants to be fully involved. Similarly, family and youth participants are more likely to be active and long term members of a board if the structure is understandable to them, with information that helps them to be fully engaged.

*Structure* refers to the logistics of the meeting, content in the meeting, materials available before and after meetings, and the relationship building that occurs as part of participating on a board.

### ***Meeting Time, Location, and Call-in Flexibility***

Consistent participation by board members, including families and youth, is often dependent on the meetings being easily accessible. When setting up the meeting times, locations, and use of technology to participate, it is a good idea for boards to consider the needs of the families and youth they hope to recruit or the specific families and youth already participating.

*Meeting Times:* Some families and youth are able to attend meetings during work hours, but for many typical meeting times can be a barrier to participation. Boards may want to explore meeting times that balance family and youth needs with other board members needs, such as late afternoon meetings that occur after school hours, evening meetings with dinner provided, or even Saturday meetings. Moving board meetings outside of traditional working hours requires a commitment to authentic family and youth involvement on the part of all board members.

*Transportation Issues:* Transportation issues can become significant barriers for families and youth wishing to participate on a board. Depending on the families and youth participating, boards may want to move their meetings to locations that are more accessible by public transit and/or have free parking available. Carpooling or coordinating ride shares might also be an option.

*Locations:* Not only is it important to consider whether the location is accessible in terms of transportation, it's also important to ensure that the location is comfortable

for all participants. Boards might want to consider holding their meetings at recreation centers, community centers, libraries or faith communities. We recommend that locations also be handicapped accessible, and generally appropriate for and accessible to those populations from which you are hoping to have participation.

*For example, meetings held at county court houses, or hospital settings, regardless of how nice the meeting rooms may be, may feel intimidating to families and youth. Meetings held in mental health centers or other service centers have stigma associated with them. Board meetings in community venues unrelated to specific service system issues are more accessible for many families and youth.*

*Interpreters:* If you have family or youth members who are not fully fluent in English, you will need to provide interpreters (including possibly sign language interpreters) and translated documents.

*Teleconferencing:* Making teleconferencing available can be helpful for all board participants when they are unable to attend in person. The meeting norms can still be to participate in person, but by creating technology access for those unable to attend in person, the board will have a greater opportunity to engage families and youth in the discussions and decisions they are making.

### ***Pre-Meeting Orientations***

New board members bring new ideas and fresh viewpoints to board service. They typically need help in keeping the big picture, not their special interest issue, in mind and in learning about the boards history, goals, and current activities. This is no different for a family or youth participant. Creating orientation materials for new board members can benefit all new members, not just the families and youth. Typical topics to include in orientation materials are:

- Mission, vision, and values of the board;
- Bylaws for the board: Voting rights, Grievance, Length of term, Code of conduct
- Statement of the board's responsibilities;
- Board history and accomplishments;
- Board goals and current activities;
- Future activities;
- Biographies of current board members and staff to the board;
- Name and contact information of the board chair and key staff;
- Meeting expectations; and
- Scope of work for board members – their roles and responsibilities;

A scope of work, job description, or role definition for board members should outline the required number of meetings per year, the extent to which board members are expected to review materials between meetings, and

the types of “homework” that board members may be asked to complete between meetings. Additionally, it is useful for all participants, including families and youth, to clearly lay out expectations for how the participant will bring to the table the perspective of the constituents they were appointed to represent.

*Job Description: For example, the job description could include:*

- Always put the mission of the board before single issues;
- Devote time to learning the history and past decisions;
- When you speak in community settings, you speak as a representative of the board;
- Focus on the big picture, instead of the small details; and
- Represent your constituency by bringing a broader perspective to the board

### **Meeting Decorum**

*Acronyms: For example, your board may spend time talking about developing systems of care. To make sure the term is understood, either take time to briefly explain it in meetings or include a description in the orientation materials.*

Participation in board

meetings can be overwhelming for new members who have not been involved in the discussions and learning that has happened over time as part of board participation. To help new members fully participate, including family and youth participants, it is important to:

1. Avoid using *acronyms or other jargon* whenever possible. Think about the language used to eliminate a sense of intimidation. Sometimes, it’s not easy to do, when key names or phrases are a common part of what the board talks about. Consider developing a glossary of terms or acronyms used in board meetings.

*Background: For example, if the board is revisiting a program it funded last year, rather than diving into the outcomes from the program, take time to describe the purpose of the program, how much it was funded for, and the expectations the board had for the program. This will most likely be useful not only for the family and youth members, but for the other board members as well*

2. Provide *background information* on each topic covered during the board meeting. In general, if it wasn’t discussed a very recent previous meeting, then everyone can benefit from a review.
3. Create *meeting norms* that define the behaviors and expectations of board members to ensure the meeting is effective and successful.

*Examples of norms that support authentic family and youth involvement include:*

- Give opinion not judgment;
- Listen actively and seek to understand;
- Respect others and do not interrupt;
- Avoid sidebar conversations; and
- Assume positive intent.

4. At the start of the meeting, particularly when new members are present, conduct an ice-breaker or 'get to know your exercise' to enhance group cohesion.

### ***Post-Meeting Follow Up and the Role of Meeting Minutes***

All board members will periodically miss meetings. For family and youth participants representing populations who are involved with mental health, substance abuse, special education, child welfare, juvenile justice, chronic health care or other public service systems, it is important to recognize that they may miss meetings due to family crises that have to take precedent over board involvement.

To support a family member or youth's continued involvement, post-meeting follow-up and information plays an important role:

1. *Meeting minutes* that clearly outline not only the decisions made, but also the discussion leading up to the decisions, can help prevent rehashing the same issues over and over as different board members attend each meeting. They will also help families and youth to identify if key decisions have been made where family and youth input would have significantly changed the course of the discussion.
2. *Individual follow-up* by phone or email, depending on what the family or youth participant prefers, can help keep them engaged between meetings. If the family or youth participant has indicated they will not be able to make it to a meeting, it can be helpful to let them know about the issues coming up and get their input prior to meeting.
3. Make sure to identify the best *contact person* if the family or youth participant has questions or concerns about the meeting they missed.

### ***Ongoing Relationship Building and Mentoring for Families and Youth***

A mentor system will help new board members to become comfortable with their new role and understand how the board works. For families and youth participating on a board, it can also help them feel less isolated from the rest of the board members. Mentors can:

- Provide context and history, any relevant policies and procedures, including decision-making and voting and grievance issues;

- Make sure new member's needs are being met, including addressing any concerns about the content or structure of the meeting and helping resolve misunderstandings or conflicts;
- Advocate for the new board member, particularly if the family or youth participant is not comfortable speaking up for themselves; and
- Be the consistent contact for the family or youth participant throughout their board involvement, including taking time for pre-meeting discussions to ensure the new board members ability to fully participate in the process.

When assigning a mentor to a family or youth participant:

- Make sure that the board member has the time and interest in being a mentor;
- Make sure that the board member and the family or youth participant understand the role of the mentor;
- Check that the mentor board member has the content and knowledge needed
- Find whether the family or youth participant is comfortable with the mentor on a personal level;
- Consider that matching is sometimes effective between opposites, as they provide divergent thinking and may balance one another's perspectives
- Consider the role of age, race and ethnicity, gender, and other factors when matching board members with family and youth participants.

### ***Creating a Safe Place for Disclosure***

Families and youth who are invited to participate on a board contribute their personal stories to the expertise and knowledge of the board. For board members representing organizations instead of families and youth, many work in the field of behavioral health because they too have personal and family experiences with behavioral health issues. These professionals are not expected to self-disclose and speak from their own life story if they choose not to, but because we often expect that of family members, it is important to create a safe place for them share their stories.

To create a greater sense of safety and equality, boards can make a point to have everyone bring personal stories or personal passion for the issue to the meetings.

*For example, during introductions everyone could be asked to share why the issues facing the board are important to them. This does not require anyone to disclose their stories, but does help to equalize the dialogue, because everyone, not just the family, is introducing themselves as someone passionate and personally invested in the issues facing the board.*

## ***Strategies for Acknowledging the Unique Perspectives of Families and Youth***

Families and youth bring to the board values that have been tested and reinforced by their experiences as service users in behavioral health and related systems (Lazear, 2004). They bring a unique perspective to the board and can give a realistic view of how policies and programs impact consumers. Regular acknowledgement of this perspective can be reinforced by:

- Asking families and youth to initiate a discussion related to an area of their interest or concern;
- Ensuring no new policy or procedure is initiated until families and youth have opportunity to weigh in along with all other board members;
- Exploring whether and how families and youth can take the new initiative, policy or procedure to a larger group of families/consumer/youth to vet and provide feedback and input;
- Recognizing that families and youth may have a difficult time to giving constructive feedback if the room appears to strongly in support of the issue and develop alternative ways to pursue their perspective such as written feedback or a more intimate setting;
- Acknowledging that the perspective of a service user is invaluable to the process and offers insight that no one else is able to provide; and
- To use active listening skills and paraphrase to ensure understanding of the perspectives offered by families and youth.

## ***Materials and Examples***

- ✓ Example Bylaws
- ✓ Example Letter of Agreement between Boards and Board Member
- ✓ Example Orientation Packet
- ✓ Example Meeting Norms
- ✓ Example Meeting Minutes Template
- ✓ Example Acronyms List
- ✓ Family and Youth Involvement Top Ten Do's and Don't's Lists

**Please note:** The resources provided in this workbook are in no way exhaustive.