

Meaningful Engagement and Partnership with Domestic Violence Survivors to Improve Safe Access to Child Support Services

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Why involve survivors of domestic violence in child support improvement initiatives?

The design and functioning of the child support system directly affects the safety and well-being of domestic violence (DV) survivors and their children. These effects can range from extremely helpful (increased disposable income, financial stability) to extremely harmful (child support enforcement triggering retaliatory violence, unsafe parenting time for children). Despite previous efforts to improve child support processes (Family Violence Indicator, Good Cause determinations, staff trainings), many survivors continue to fear negative consequences of pursuing child support. To create effective and safe processes for DV survivors, it is crucial to engage survivors and DV advocates, programs, and coalitions in co-designing and evaluating modifications to the current child support system. This creates unique opportunities to advance child support safety and accessibility for survivors.

Co-design is a transformative approach that challenges conventional power dynamics in which decisions are made on behalf of a group without input from those most affected. It emphasizes collaboration with those most affected by the issue or policy and places relationships at the forefront. Further, co-design thrives on transparency and shared power, and strikes a balance between aspiration and practicality, thereby shaping programs and policies that genuinely resonate with survivors.

This document presents concrete tips for child support agencies on meaningful engagement and partnership with DV survivors. First, we provide overall strategies to support survivor well-being and empowerment throughout the initiative lifespan. Then, we share concrete tips for each phase of a child support services improvement process: planning, design, implementation, and performance monitoring.

How can we create meaningful opportunities for survivors to share their expertise?

Authentic co-design with DV survivors requires breaking down the power dynamics at play in any process involving professionals and families. DV survivors are the experts on the *effect* of the child support system on their families, and child support professionals understand how the system currently *functions*, including policies, technology, and political climate.

Effective partnerships value both impact expertise and technical expertise. To counter “business as usual” approaches—in which holders of professional expertise be sole decision-makers and priority-

setters—child support agencies should identify and implement mechanisms to uplift survivors’ power and decision-making influence within planning, design, implementation, and performance monitoring.

The degree to which survivors are involved and supported in the co-design of system enhancements may ultimately determine how transformative those modifications will be. Agencies should strive to engage multiple survivors in a variety of ways, both so that survivors can support each other and to avoid a narrow view on what survivors need. It is important to ask survivors how they want to be involved (e.g., consultant, advisory group member) and to allow flexibility in roles, as capacity and needs may shift over time. Consider creating opportunities such as:

- Serving on a core leadership team that establishes the vision and values for the program and holds decision-making authority about strategic direction and priorities.
- Joining an advisory group that informs design of policy and practice enhancements, receives regular progress updates, and acts as ambassadors for the initiative.
- Acting as a key informant through qualitative interviews or focus groups representing a wide range of survivors and DV advocates.
- Completing surveys.
- Engaging in evaluation activities, performance monitoring efforts, and meaning making (i.e., interpretation) of results.

Regardless of how survivors are involved in child support improvement initiatives, ensure that their voices and experiences are centered in articulating the initiative’s values and in decision-making.

Partnerships with DV survivors to improve child support services also require sensitivity to the trauma that they and their children have experienced. This guide outlines *survivor-centered* and *trauma-informed* strategies that prioritize the well-being and empowerment of survivors and their children throughout the process of implementing and evaluating child support system enhancements.

Barriers that Survivors Face

DV survivors face several potential barriers in accessing and navigating the child support system posed by the system’s structure and service provision, as well as by their own interpersonal relationships. Because many child support staff do not have extensive experience engaging people who’ve experienced DV, it is important for them to start with reflecting on their practices and working intentionally to change their mindsets.

Some habits/norms of U.S. culture that have led to this practice gap include:

- Privileging professional experience over lived experience.
- Understanding low-income status or receipt of public benefits as being the result of lack of individual effort (“pulling oneself up by the bootstraps”).
- Believing that systems are inherently neutral in their impact.
- Operating from a sense of urgency (“we only have five years”, “we are on a timeclock to open a case”).
- Psychological constructs that promote “savior” thinking which frame survivors only as people “who need to be saved” and does not acknowledge survivor resiliency, skills, and agency. In this framework, professionals are “saviors” who don’t have any of their own needs, boundaries, personal triggers, etc., and are solely meant to fix and repair the situation *for* the survivor, not *with* the survivor.

In agencies' genuine efforts to collaborate with DV survivors to address child support's system structure and service provision, it's crucial to remain vigilant against potential pitfalls that could hinder progress. A key concern is avoiding tokenism by actively involving a substantial group of survivors in the improvement initiative, and creating balance between professional insights and survivor experiences.

Agencies should dedicate time to cultivating a shared comprehension of the system's dynamics and its unique effects on survivors, ensuring that their perspectives are fully understood. To amplify the impact of partnerships, it is important to engage survivors from the outset, aligning the initiative's direction and scope with their valuable insights. Rather than dismissing possibilities (e.g., saying certain things "just can't be done"), teams must explore creative avenues to overcome challenges and reframe constraints as opportunities for innovative problem-solving.

Survivors within the child support program may face additional interpersonal challenges that affect their overall experiences. It's common for DV survivors to maintain contact with an abusive ex-partner due to child support obligations, custody arrangements, parenting time needs, or involvement with child welfare agencies. Unfortunately, these connections can open doors to ongoing harassment, coercion, and control by the ex-partner, leading to logistical and emotional hurdles that make consistent participation within human services programs a struggle for survivors. These very challenges often dissuade survivors from even considering child support assistance in the initial stages.

Strategies and tips for meaningful engagement with DV survivors

1. Support survivor well-being and empowerment.

Although partnering with survivors in child support improvement initiatives may require extra time and effort, it is critical if agencies aim to increase the availability and safety of child support for more DV survivors. The following are guidelines for promoting survivor well-being and empowerment in a child support initiative. Formalizing these or similar guidelines as commitments among participants in the initiative can provide a useful container for collaboration.

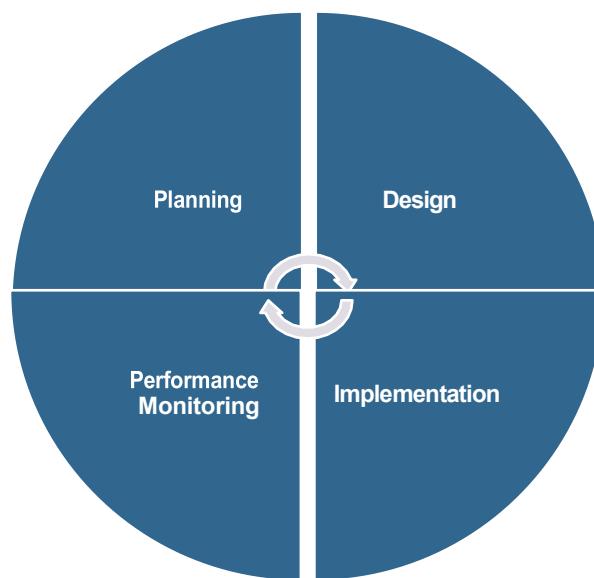
- **Engage survivors continuously and long-term**, rather than seeking their input on a one-time or inconsistent basis. On-going engagement builds trust, maximizes the opportunity to truly understand what survivors and their children experience in the child support system, and invites healthy accountability for the improvements underway.
- **Compensate survivors** who are on-going team members and offer incentives to survivors who participate in surveys or interviews. This practice can help to show that survivor time and contributions are valued and necessary.
- **Be prepared to offer material and emotional support** for survivors involved in the initiative. Material support might include transportation, child-care reimbursement, or technical support to facilitate their participation in virtual meetings. Emotional support might be provided by a DV advocate or a clinician who is also a partner in the initiative.
- **Create partnerships with agencies and seek out resources** that can support survivors' holistic participation through legal aid, child-care assistance, housing stabilization, financial literacy, etc.
- **Protect survivors' privacy**, even though it might not always be possible to assure complete confidentiality. Agencies can consult with their General Counsel's Office to determine what information is private versus public for survivors participating in the initiative. Sharing

confidentiality practices and limits promotes the agency of survivors to determine what they participate in given their own understanding of their personal risks.

- Some meeting materials may be subject to a public records request. Discuss the specifics with survivors and establish a written agreement that outlines what steps will be taken to protect their privacy, any limitations to privacy, and options for revoking the agreement.
- Establish an agreement about prioritizing the sensitivity of personal stories while using the insights from those experiences to guide and inform the work.
- Promote autonomy and confidentiality by allowing survivors to choose whether and how to share their stories and experiences.
- Allow for anonymous participation, when feasible, to continue to elevate the experiences of survivors.
- **Develop responsive methods** to partner with survivors with different backgrounds, languages, and abilities. Methods may include meeting only in accessible spaces, creating space and time in meetings for social connections and food, using interpreters, communicating by phone or in person rather than exclusively through email, allowing for virtual or hybrid meeting participation, etc.
- **Create meeting spaces that share power** amongst all members through intentional development of agendas, shared facilitation responsibilities, open participation, accessible communication methods, etc.
- **Establish agreements about how decisions will be made** when consensus is not possible. One example is to employ a [Gradients of Agreement](#) process, with a caveat that if survivors believe that a particular decision will cause harm to survivors or their children, the process is paused for consultation with others (e.g., legal staff, grant monitor, federal partners, etc.).

2. Involve survivors in all phases of child support improvement initiatives

To build trust, share knowledge, and ensure that a range of survivor perspectives and experiences are accurately represented, involve multiple survivors in all phases of the initiative. The figure below represents typical phases of an initiative: planning, design, implementation, and performance monitoring. Continue to use the strategies shared above in Support Survivor Wellbeing and Empowerment through all the phases described below.



PLANNING

The planning stage of a child support improvement initiative involves listening to survivors' perspectives on their and their children's needs, analyzing available data, and co-defining the problem(s) and the root causes of the problem(s) that the team wants to solve. This stage also includes engaging with others to think creatively about what might be done to address the issue, considering both short- and long-term solutions. Proposals and grant applications are usually developed at this stage and outline the initiative's goals, objectives, and proposed outcomes. **Be sure that the initiative's goals are focused on improving outcomes and experiences for survivors and their families.**

Strategies for Partnering with DV Survivors in the Planning Stage

- **Connect with DV advocacy organizations** (e.g., local DV organizations, state DV coalition) to learn what they know about survivors' experiences in the child support system, and to plan for directly engaging survivors.
- **Prioritize open recruitment efforts** for survivors and other members of the project team or advisory board. This could include working with a wide range of DV partners to recruit survivors, public recruitment efforts, and promotion through professional networks or other partner agencies.
- **Include funding for survivor compensation** in proposal/grant applications and consider how funds will be distributed to survivors (e.g., directly through your organization, through a DV partner, etc.). Funding should include compensation for ongoing survivor participation and incentives for one-time data collection efforts (e.g., surveys, focus groups, interviews).
- **Invest time in team development and relationship building** to ensure that everyone participating in the initiative has a baseline understanding about roles, responsibilities, and requirements of funders. Ensure that everyone has a voice in setting group norms and initiative goals.
- **Be transparent.** Survivors should be made aware of how their insights will be incorporated, what roles they will have, and what roles staff will have.
- **Utilize a trauma-informed approach** to gather initial information in ways that do not place a heavy burden on survivors. For example, surveys can be onerous for survivors, as they must provide information and relive their trauma alone. While more time intensive, consider conducting individual interviews or focus groups and asking open ended questions:
 - How was your experience applying for child support?
 - What made your experience challenging?
 - What would you have liked to see instead?
- **Data or research can be used to contextualize the experiences of survivors.** However, it is important to not prioritize research and data at the expense of survivors' voices. Remember that limited research has been conducted with survivors and therefore might not be fully representative of people's experiences.
 - When the data contradicts survivors' reports, make note of the discrepancy and bring the team together to discuss implications for the initiative. Having conversations with survivors about why the data seems to contradict reported experiences can be enormously helpful. Survivors may be able to identify ways that the study's recruitment methods were not comprehensive, the measures were irrelevant, or other accessibility issues prevented full participation, etc. After discussion, the team can collectively decide how to best make sense of the data and how to use it.

DESIGN

In the design stage of a child support improvement initiative, the team takes the solutions developed during planning and creates a detailed plan to implement them. After determining the specific interventions or strategies that will be implemented, the team will set measurable goals and objectives, and identify the necessary resources and people who need to be involved to ensure successful co-design. During this stage, keep the needs and perspectives of DV survivors at the forefront. This is a stage in which survivors' voices may not be fully incorporated, as project managers take the lead in designing implementation plans.

Remember that there is a difference between requesting feedback and co-designing. Seeking feedback entails giving a plan to someone and asking for their opinion. Co-designing with survivors means that survivors have equal input and decision-making about what goes into an implementation plan, what is prioritized, and what strategies will be tried out. Nonetheless, co-designing initiatives with survivors can be challenging because of bureaucratic barriers such as mandated branding, clearance processes, communications rules and regulations, and leadership expectations and oversight. If this is the case, be as transparent as possible about your limits of co-designing.

Strategies for Partnering with DV Survivors in the Design Stage

- **Collectively map the touchpoints at which key child support decisions are made**, and at what points child support intersects with other systems (e.g., courts, TANF, child welfare, etc.). Create space for survivors to share how they are impacted at those touchpoints.
- **Define the anticipated policy and practice changes** (e.g., in child support, courts, DV programs, etc.) that will lead to improved outcomes and experiences for survivors and their families. Without this clarity at the design stage, results will be harder to evaluate.
- **Recognize the lived expertise of survivors in creating new tools** (i.e., screeners) and procedures (i.e., desk aids, policies, information memos). Survivors can lead the development of screening/application questions, plain language explanations, and public-facing documents about child support.
- **Engage survivors in framing the initiative's research questions** and performance monitoring design, including recruitment strategies, materials, survey questions, data collection methods, etc.
- **Collaborate with DV advocacy organizations** to co-develop proposed interventions and strategies. This way, the initiative can ensure that the proposed strategies complement, rather than detract from or undermine, efforts that DV agencies are undertaking on behalf of survivors.
- **Evaluate each proposed solution** through the lens of how it will impact all communities and survivors who are impacted by public systems. Engage people and programs from identified groups and ask targeted questions:
 - Would any of these proposed strategies harm survivors in the community? How?
 - How might these proposed strategies benefit survivors and their children?
 - How would you modify any of the proposed strategies for this initiative?
- **Respect feedback on proposed solutions**. If you receive information that a proposed solution may or will harm survivors or their children from a specific community/group, do not move forward with those ideas. Consult with legal counsel and federal partners and explicitly state that you have received input that the proposed strategies will harm survivors or their children. Ask for their suggestions on how to address those concerns, and/or to advocate for eliminating that mandate.
 - If you still *must* move forward, be fully transparent about the regulatory or statutory

mandates that leave you no other option but to employ those harmful strategies at the present time.

- **Use a variety of communication methods**, including visual aids and multimedia strategies to present the initiative design in an engaging and accessible way. For in-person meetings, provide copies of all handouts and meeting materials, as not everyone may have or bring a personal device.
- **Design multiple ways for survivors to provide input** (e.g., written, verbal, online input; interviews, surveys, focus groups; offer anonymous participation opportunities where feasible; etc.)

IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation state of a child support improvement initiative is where the initiative's design is put into action. This stage typically includes hiring and training staff, coordinating with partners, and carrying out activities and services—all with a focus on creating conditions to achieve the initiative's goals and objectives. Trying out new processes, procedures, and tools in this stage allows the team to see how the changes are working, and to adjust as needed. Focusing on survivor perspectives and experiences at this stage ensures that the initiative is having a positive impact on survivors' and their children's lives.

Strategies for Partnering with DV Survivors in the Implementation Stage

- **Invite survivors to join the hiring process** for new project staff. Consider asking survivors to draft and review interview questions, screen applications, and sit on the interview panel. The staff being hired are there to serve the community, and the "customer" should have a say in hiring staff who will work on their behalf.
- **Include survivors in trainings**, or as trainers, for the initiative. Elicit information from survivors about what child support staff need to know about DV and their experiences with the child support system and integrate this into training. Request survivor feedback and incorporate modifications into future training modules and sessions.
- **Keep survivors and other constituents informed** about the progress of the initiative through team meetings, regular updates on a website or social media page, newsletters, or other accessible communication channels. Include mechanisms for survivors to provide feedback and suggestions throughout implementation.
- **Co-design solutions** to implementation challenges with the entire team, including survivors. During the implementation phase, adjustments to the initiative's plan may be needed. Ensure full team approval before changes are made.
- **Utilize your agreed-upon, shared decision-making process** to ensure that the initiative remains responsive to survivor needs and perspectives. If survivors tell you that an initiative practice or deliverable is harmful, listen to this feedback and stop immediately.
 - Document this input and consult with other partners (e.g., federal partners, legal counsel, grant monitors, etc.) to support you in pivoting to different practices.
- **Create opportunities for survivors to give feedback** and suggest improvements to the initiative as it is being implemented through surveys, interviews, or other methods.
- **Continue building and deepening relationships** with survivors, DV programs and other community partners that are focused on sustaining the initiative and its impact beyond the initial implementation period.

- Identify ways to continue the work of the initiative over the long-term, and to ensure that it has a lasting and positive impact on survivors and the broader community.
- Be transparent from the beginning about what happens when the initiative ends to build trust and generate new ideas about how to ensure the initiative's sustainability.
- Identify what initiative actions, services, or supports qualify as core child support activities and work with your financial team to incorporate these into the annual child support budget. Consider blending and braiding funding to extend the impact and duration of initiative activities.

PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The performance monitoring stage of a child support improvement initiative involves assessing the effectiveness of the implemented solutions and measuring the outcomes against the proposed goals and objectives. This phase may include continuous quality improvement and evaluation activities.

The outcomes derived from performance monitoring initiatives frequently result in adjustments to policies, alterations in funding mechanisms, revisions to procedural protocols, and other related modifications. Engaging survivors during this stage can yield important information about the effectiveness of the initiative, additional gaps in services, unintended consequences of policy and procedure modifications, and how to improve the initiative in the future. Communicate performance monitoring results with the broader survivor community and integrate their input into future planning and implementation.

Strategies for Partnering with DV Survivors in the Performance Monitoring Stage

- **Center survivors impacted by public systems** in evaluating the impact of child support enhancements and use this information to make additional improvements. Collect data on desired outcomes, such as improvements in survivor and children's safety and well-being.
- **Involve survivors as partners** in the design and administration of the performance monitoring phase, including developing research questions and measures, collecting data, interpreting data, and disseminating results. Have survivors serve as expert reviewers for tools and measures and conduct cognitive interviews with survivors.
 - Ensure that surveys, interviews, and focus groups are conducted in a trauma-informed way. This may include allowing survivors to opt out of any questions they do not want to answer; giving them control of pacing; allowing for anonymous participation; and ending on questions about hope, resilience, and joy.
 - Engage survivors in the design of the recruitment process and strategies for increasing participation.
- **Communicate preliminary findings to the survivor community** in a timely manner and provide opportunities for shared meaning-making.
- **Acknowledge the limitations and challenges** of the performance monitoring process and recruit survivors to share their honest feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the initiative, its implementation, and results.

- **Provide opportunities for survivors to co-design modifications** or improvements to the initiative based on the preliminary data, feedback, and findings to make them relevant, feasible, and effective.
- **Co-develop dissemination materials with survivors**, especially but not exclusively those materials that are intended for other survivors. This activity builds capacity for survivors by creating shared ownership in the design and delivery of public-facing resources. Look for opportunities where survivors can take the lead, instead of just giving feedback, on tasks including creating the communication strategy and drafting materials.

Conclusion

Effective collaboration with DV survivors is critical to the success of any initiative aimed at addressing their needs. To meaningfully engage survivors, involve them in the whole initiative, not just the parts about survivors. Invite their full participation in the planning, design, implementation, and performance monitoring phases. By doing so, the initiative can be tailored to address the unique challenges that DV survivors and their children face and help to ensure that they receive a menu of appropriate resources rather than a prescriptive service model that professionals *think* is best suited to their needs and lived experiences.