

# Supporting Family Participation in Systems of Care

## Recognizing the value of family participation

Family participation at all levels of the system is a core value of a system of care for children and adolescents with mental and behavioral health needs. Child-serving systems often seek the involvement of families but encounter difficulties in recruiting and retaining families to participate on committees or advisory councils, review materials, or attend trainings. Sustained family involvement requires a commitment of the organization's staff time, resources to support family participation, and development of written policies and procedures outlining how family involvement will occur.

Many family members are interested in contributing, but family responsibilities, employment schedules, and financial limitations can make it difficult for them to participate. Supporting family members with compensation for their time and expertise, child care assistance, and transportation resources helps facilitate consistent and sustainable family participation.

Organizations should develop written policies and procedures that ensure family members are adequately compensated for their time and any related expenses and have opportunities to participate in training activities and conferences. This practice demonstrates that family voice is valued and lived experience as a caregiver is critical in developing, implementing, and evaluating systems of care.

## Organizational commitment of staff time

Family involvement requires dedicated staff time to recruit families to participate, provide an orientation, and ensure ongoing support for family member participation. While everyone in the organization has a role in involving and listening to families, responsibility for recruiting and supporting family participation should be delegated to a person or unit within the organization so that it becomes integrated into the fabric of the organization.



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## Financial compensation

Financial compensation for families' time is an acknowledgment of the expertise that families bring to policy and decision-making tables.

- Stipends: Compensate the family member for their time participating in meetings, work groups, committees, or conferences. Stipend amounts are usually paid on a prorated basis according to the amount of time the family member participates. For example:
  - \$25 for up to two hours
  - \$50 for half a day (four hours)
  - \$75-\$100 for a full day (eight hours)
- Taxable income: Families should be informed that stipends are taxable income. They may be required to complete a W-9 form for the organization, and if they are paid over a specific amount in one calendar year, they will receive a 1099 form.\* This form shows the amount that must be reported on their income tax return. Families should be encouraged to contact a tax professional for specific guidance.
- Cash or check: Keep in mind some families may not have checking accounts and could have difficulty cashing a check.
- Gift cards: Gift cards to local grocery stores or retail stores are another way to compensate families for their time.

*\*The current taxable amounts are not included in this document because of the potential for changes in tax law.*

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## Transportation expenses

Transportation can be a barrier to families' ability to participate in meetings or attend conferences. Families may not have funds for gas or parking fees or they might rely on public transportation. Providing transportation assistance is important and should be considered in addition to other financial compensation. If reimbursement is not immediately available, organizations should ensure

that families have sufficient funds to pay parking fees, have enough gas to return home, or have funds for a bus or taxi.

- Mileage reimbursement (based on the agency's mileage reimbursement rate)
- Gas cards
- Bus tokens or passes
- Prepaid taxi vouchers
- Lodging and per diem (for meetings or conferences that require overnight stays)

*Note:* Current per-diem rates for your location can be found at the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) website: <https://gsa.gov/portal/category/100120>

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## Child care expenses

Some families may require child care so they can participate in meetings.

- On-site child care: There are special considerations for on-site child care for children with behavioral health needs. This requires an adequate number of staff trained to work with children who experience behavioral health challenges. Child care staff also must have passed background checks in accordance with state law.
- Child care reimbursement: Organizations may find it easier to reimburse families for child care costs incurred when participating in meetings or training activities. Rates are typically based on average child care costs in the local area. Organizations should develop policies on child care reimbursement, including whether reimbursement is paid when another family member such as a grandparent or a spouse is providing child care. Organizations also may require documentation of child care costs for reimbursement.

## Other supports and considerations

- Translation support: Families with limited English speaking ability may need translators to allow them to fully participate in meetings. Organizations should ensure that there is funding available and develop partnerships with entities that offer translation services.
- Interpretation support: Family members who are deaf or hearing impaired may require sign language interpreters to participate in meetings. As with translation support, organizations should consider funding necessary for this service and develop partnerships with their local or state deaf/hard of hearing support organization.
- Advance per diem: In the case of full-day meetings, provide family members the per diem in advance of the meeting or conference, allowing purchase of meals if they are not provided.
- Time of meeting: Meetings should be held at times when parents are available, giving family members who work the opportunity to participate.
- Location of meeting: Meetings should be held at locations that are on public transportation lines, are accessible for individuals with mobility challenges, and have adequate, free parking. When selecting a location, consider that families may have had negative experiences with particular systems, such as child welfare agencies or education, and therefore may be hesitant to attend meetings in such locations.
- Teleconferencing: While not ideal on a regular basis, teleconferencing may enable families to participate who may not otherwise be able to do so because of distance or other considerations.

## Policies and procedures

Organizations should develop written policies and procedures outlining criteria for eligibility for stipends and reimbursement for expenses, the specific types and rates of compensation, and other support that will be provided to families for their participation in activities. Procedures and forms for reimbursement should be developed with clear instructions on how and when families will receive stipends or reimbursement for travel and/or child care expenses.

It also is helpful to develop a letter of agreement for families to sign that explains what is expected of them (i.e., participation in a specific number of meetings in a year) and what they will receive in return (i.e., compensation for time and transportation reimbursement). Sample policies are listed in the resources section of this tip sheet.

## Resources

The Early Connections System of Care in Alameda County, Calif., has developed a full policy on this topic. This effort was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's System of Care for Children's Mental Health Initiative:

Stipend/Family Reimbursement Policy for Parents/Caregivers and Youth

<http://www.fredla.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Sample-Stipend-Policy.pdf>

*Things 2 Consider: Stipending Youth & Young Adults.* April 2016. Youth M.O.V.E. National.

[http://www.youthmovenational.org/images/T2C\\_Final\\_Stipends.pdf](http://www.youthmovenational.org/images/T2C_Final_Stipends.pdf)

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