How can organizations assess their readiness to co-design?

BY CHRISTOPHER RUDD, SURBHI KALRA, JUSTIN WALKER, AND JUSTIN HAYDEN¹

As the child welfare system and its providers, partners, and other key stakeholders become more aware of and intentional about addressing racial inequities, collective focus is necessarily shifting to strategies that promote equity, prevention, and family well-being. While recent efforts have increasingly encouraged racial equity, kinship care support, and collaboration with adjacent agencies, there is still much work to be done to repair the disproportionate harm the system has caused to Black and American Indian/Alaska Native, and multi-racial children and families.²

Prior to the 1960s, Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children largely were excluded from the child welfare system. Since their inclusion, children and families of color have been overly surveilled and separated, creating and perpetuating disparate outcomes. According to the Children's Bureau, "racial disparities exist at every major decision-making point along the child welfare spectrum." Nationally, Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, and multi-racial children continue to be overrepresented in the child welfare system. These children collectively make up 19% of the total child population but 32% of children in foster care. Additionally, Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children are more likely than others to be removed



Updated February 2022 casey.org 1

from their homes and their families, 5,6 and are more likely to have their parental rights terminated. These outcomes highlight that racially disproportionate interactions with child welfare persist throughout the system and raise critical questions about the extent to which structural racism and decision-making biases impact these outcomes.

In order to address these disparities, there has been increased interest in **co-designing the future state of child welfare policy and practice with people with lived experience**. However, there is an overarching lack of understanding of how to approach co-design, including determining who should be involved, identifying equitable and authentic strategies for engagement, and clearly defining processes and methods for co-creation. This brief provides an overview of what it means to engage in co-design, and offers key considerations for leaders and other key stakeholders who want to authentically engage people with lived experience.

What is co-design?

Co-design is an approach to designing with, not for, people and communities. This approach **amplifies the voices and experiences of the people closest to the needs** addressed through an engagement or initiative. It also **prioritizes relationships, increases trust across all stakeholders, and uses participatory approaches** to ensure the work is guided by those most affected. Co-design actively involves all stakeholders — people with lived experience, community residents, organizations, and institutional partners — in the design process to help ensure the results meet their needs and are usable.

Co-design requires sharing power with people with lived experience across the entirety of an engagement or initiative, from determining the focus of exploration, to the design, implementation, and evaluation. It is a partnership where all stakeholders have equal opportunities to utilize their abilities, make decisions, and own responsibilities. This collaborative model recognizes the value people with lived experience bring to the work, and it challenges everyone involved in the process to provide them with meaningful opportunities to learn and develop skills that can be utilized beyond a single engagement.

What values and principles bolster ChiByDesign's co-design practice? ChiByDesign's co-design practice is grounded in servant leadership, enabling a serve-first attitude that centers the work on empowering and uplifting those with lived experience. For ChiByDesign, servant leadership is the core tenet of co-design, enabling it to be fully in service of and biased in support of the most affected or oppressed. It is a leadership philosophy in which the goal of the leader is to serve: the servant-leader shares power, prioritizes the needs of others, and helps people develop with the intention of seeing growth in those being served.



Source for diagram: Co-design mindsets, adapted from *Beyond Sticky Notes, co-design for real: Mindsets, methods, and movements* by Kelly Ann McKercher. ChiByDesign has added Servant Leadership as the core tenant of co-design.

Are you ready for co-design?

Before engaging people with lived experience in co-design, it is crucial to identify if the system and its actors are willing to engage in the practice of co-design. **Regardless of intention, attempts at authentic engagement miss the mark and may fail if those involved are not ready to shift power dynamics, decision-making structures, and engagement strategies.** Organizations and leaders must collectively assess their readiness to co-design with people with lived experience, and address a number of key considerations before an engagement can begin in order to gain clarity and identify and resolve any foreseeable operational barriers to engagement.

1. Compensation for lived expertise. Organizations must provide equitable financial compensation to individuals and communities with lived experience, valuing their time and expertise. Expecting people with lived experience to volunteer their time, or otherwise failing to adequately and equitably compensate peers, is exploitative, particularly in the context of marginalization and systemic vulnerability (i.e. reduced or compromised ability to realize or maintain a sustainable livelihood).^{7,8} Moreover, because social stigma accompanies financial barriers, it is recommended that organizations adopt a trauma-informed approach to providing compensation to people with lived experience.^{9,10} Thus, leadership and other staff must create a safe space for people to bring forward their lived experiences without judgment or fear of not being compensated if their opinions and experiences differ from those of the organization.

Questions for consideration:

- Have funding and additional resources been secured to equitably compensate people with lived experience for their time and expertise?
- Is compensation for lived experience accurately measured according to the level of participation?
- In addition to financial compensation, how can the organization compensate individuals and communities with lived experience?
- Does the organization or team clearly communicate compensation and other benefits to people with lived experience?

2. Letting go of power. In traditional organizational hierarchies, power equals greater influence, access, and decision-making authority. Thus, people and organizations with more power dominate the context around them. Before engaging individuals with lived experience, organizations should collectively identify and address their readiness to do so. Once there is demonstrated readiness based on answers to the questions below, organizations must identify what the transition looks like in day-to-day practice, such as in convenings, conversations, outreach, and scheduling.

Questions for consideration:

- Is the organization ready to share authority and control with people with lived experience? How would the organization practice sharing authority?
- How would the organization create space for people with lived experience to lead and guide the work even if their decisions counter those of the organization?
- Is there sufficient readiness for a more collective approach to decision-making instead of a traditional top-down approach? If so, what does that look like in practice?
- **3. Deepening relationships.** Despite child welfare's charge to keep children safe and support families, the system has historically used removal from the home as the primary means of child protection. Thus, families do not have trust in the system, creating a barrier to participation in any initiative. There needs to be continuous communication and engagement with people with lived experience before, during, and after any initiative. To reduce the barriers restricting people with lived experience from engaging, organizations should prioritize and embed lived experience as a critical component of their vision and overall strategy.

Questions for consideration:

- Does the organization have buy-in from providers, leadership team members, and other stakeholders to involve people with lived experience?
- How can the organization create and sustain consistent and meaningful relationships with people with lived experience beyond the scope of individual projects or initiatives?
- Is the organization operationally prepared to engage people with lived experience before, during and after projects or initiatives?
- **4. Shifting mindsets.** In conjunction with the previous considerations, there also is a need for distinct mindset shifts as organizations reflect and evaluate their readiness to co-design. The following mindset shifts should be evaluated and adopted by organizations as they determine readiness to co-design.

	Mindset	From	 То
POWER DYNAMICS/ SYSTEM	Which power dynamics need to shift within the system? What system shifts (policies, processes, and structures) need to happen?	We are the experts Valuing professional expertise above all Making decisions for people with lived experience and expecting them to follow	 Community is the expert Valuing professional and lived experience equally Collective decision-making with people with lived experience
CULTURE	What cultural mindsets, beliefs, practices, etc. need to shift?	"Right time" for bringing in people with lived experience Requiring a particular skill set from people with lived experience to be a part of the team Exploitive and extractive organizational culture Top-down hierarchical approach	 Embedding lived expertise in the DNA of the organization Investing time, energy and resources to educate people with lived experience and 'level the playing field.' Trauma-informed organizational strategy Bottom-up community led approach
PROCESS	What processes and procedures related to child welfare will need to shift?	Involving people with lived experiencein the process as the sounding board Engaging with people with lived experience only after becoming a part of the project Expecting to follow pre-set norms, structures, and processes	 Integrating people with lived experience from the beginning and co-creating with them Building relationships with people with lived experience beyond work and integrating them into the organization and entire project lifecycles Co-creating norms and redefining structures based on the need of the co-designers
EXPERIENCE	What shifts in interactions and associations need to happen?	Profit, compliance-driven approach Involving only a few people with lived experience Extractive culture and practices Avoiding difficult conversations	 Leading by building relationships Including multiple lived experience roles in conversations Mutually beneficial space and work dynamic Creating safe space and mechanisms to have difficult conversations and healthy conflict

Ultimately, co-design is an approach that centers and amplifies lived experience while empowering those with relevant experiences to improve their well-being through collaboration with other professionals. As we look to co-design equitable futures and shift from a child protection system that emphasizes the separation of children and families into one wholly focused on improving child and family well-being, people and communities with lived experience should be engaged to lead these efforts from the outset. Their first-hand experience with the system — knowing how it interacts with children and families, the impacts it has, and the outcomes it produces — equip them to identify the inequities and challenges children and families face, and co-create a new path forward.

- Christopher Rudd, Founder and CEO, ChiByDesign, Clinical Professor of Practice at IIT Institute of Design; Surbhi Kalra, Design Lead, ChiByDesign; Justin Walker, Design Researcher and Strategist, ChiByDesign; Justin Hayden, Cofounder of Raising Resilience, Casey Family Programs Constituent Consultant, FosterClub Alumni, Indiana Youth Advisory Board Normalcy Outreach Coordinator, and Purdue University Northwest Communication Major
- 2 For more information on partnership with people with lived experience in child welfare, please see: If I knew then what I know now: 10 strategies for addressing race equity in child welfare; a collection of Casey Family Programs briefs and resources on kinship care; and several Casey Family Programs briefs about collaboration with child welfare (What do we know about the impact of homelessness and housing instability on child welfare-involved families?, How can supportive housing help improve outcomes for families in the child welfare system?, How does high-quality early care and education improve safety, permanency, and well-being? and How can child protection agencies partner with early care and education to improve outcomes for children?)
- 3 Billingsley, A., & Giovannoni, J. M. (1972). Children of the storm: Black children and American child welfare. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanivich.
- 4 Hogan, P. T., & Siu, S. (1988). Minority children and the child welfare system: An historical perspective. Social Work, 33, 493–498.
- 5 Boyd, R. (2014). African American disproportionality and disparity in child welfare: Toward a comprehensive conceptual framework. Children and Youth Services Review, 37, 15-27.
- 6 National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) (2015). Setting the record straight: The Indian Child Welfare Act Fact Sheet. Retrieved from www.nicwa.org/ wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Setting-the-Record-Straight-ICWA-Fact-Sheet.pdf.
- 7 Cheff (2018). Compensating research participants: a survey of current practices in Toronto.
- 8 Lived Experience Advisory Council (LEAC) (2016). Nothing about us without us: seven principles for leadership and inclusion of people with lived experience of homelessness.
- 9 End Poverty Edmonton (2018). First Voice inclusion and participation equity protocol.
- 10 Greer, A.M., Newman, C., Burmeister, C., Burgess, H., Coll, M., Choisil, P., LeBlanc, B., Lacroix, K., Lampkin, H., Amlani, A., Pauly, B., & Buxton, J.A. (2017). Peer Engagement Principles and Best Practices: A Guide for BC Health Authorities and other Providers (version 2). Vancouver, BC: BC Centre for Disease Control.



ChiByDesign, a Chicago-based social and civic impact design firm, proposes using a fully integrated, constituent-led co-design approach to co-create equitable outcomes with those most affected. Following engagement with child protection agencies and key stakeholders over the last few years, ChiByDesign has begun to identify how the practice and mindsets of co-design can be used to co-create a system of child and family well-being. ChiByDesign has served as the facilitator of critical conversations and leveraged its power as designers to amplify the voices and experiences of the people closest to the needs addressed. They do so by adding people with lived experience to their teams as co-designers, nurturing their unique perspectives and providing them with tools and resources to co-create their futures.

- 800.228.3559
- 206.282.7300
- 206.282.3555

casey.org | KMResources@casey.org











