

Establishing a Lived Experience Advisory Panel: Action Steps and Considerations

The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center partnered with C4 Innovations to develop a Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP) with the goal of developing guidance around elevating the voices of people with lived expertise in the behavioral health and criminal justice systems.

The LEAP consisted of eight people from across the country with diverse backgrounds who have experiences with mental health treatment and recovery supports before, during, and after incarceration. C4 and the LEAP members worked together to conduct focus groups with additional people with lived expertise, as well as family members of people with lived experience, to gather recommendations for how counties can reduce the overincarceration of people with mental illness as well as meaningfully and intentionally include people with lived experience in developing and executing the recommended strategies.

Forming lived experience advisory panels like the CSG Justice Center's LEAP is a great way for state and local agencies and organizations to begin amplifying the voices of people who have had firsthand experience with these systems. These panels can review and provide valuable feedback on programs, policies, and processes, hold focus groups and interviews, provide recommendations for new and/or improved strategies, serve as invaluable decision-makers, and so much more. The LEAP members working with the CSG Justice Center developed the following set of key steps and considerations for organizations to successfully establish advisory panels of their own.

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1. Self-Assessment

- a. Evaluate the organizational policies and practices that may reinforce stigmas or discrimination. This can be done through guided discussion or with the use of an [equity toolkit](#).
- b. Identify internal gaps in either knowledge or practice before engaging people with lived experience to determine whether receiving technical assistance would be beneficial.

2. Purpose and Goal

- a. Determine the specific areas where lived expertise can make a significant impact, such as criminal justice reform, mental health services, or substance use recovery programs, by assessing the specific needs of the organization.
- b. Clearly outline the purpose, objectives, and expected outcomes of the advisory panel in a founding document. Be transparent about the goals and intentions involving people with lived experience and ensure that expected contributions and inherent limitations of their participation are clearly articulated.
- c. Proactively address concerns that may arise from people with lived experience during the planning process. To build and maintain trust, establish and maintain open two-way communication and collaboratively troubleshoot challenges that arise as part of the initial planning process.

3. Recruitment and Member Selection

- a. Populate a diverse selection committee of people with varied backgrounds and experiences to provide a comprehensive perspective to review applications and select members.
- b. Design outreach, recruitment, and application processes to be inclusive of people from diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. The planning committee and/or selection committee can lead these processes.
- c. Develop an equitable review and interview process with the selection committee.
- d. Collaborate with local advocacy organizations, use social media, or attend community events to reach potential panel member applicants and to ensure applicants represent diverse backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints.

4. Compensation

- a. Compensate panel members to ensure fairness, inclusivity, and sustainability while recognizing the importance and value of their unique insights and expertise.
- b. Consider surveying participants for what in-kind honorariums would feel fair and supportive. Compensation can range from providing an honorarium at the national rate for subject matter expertise to creating avenues for permanent integration of lived expertise into the work, such as employment opportunities.

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5. Training and Support

- a. Provide training and orientation to the panel members. This can include information about the panel's role, goals, the importance of confidentiality, and any relevant regulations or procedures.
- b. Provide resources, including access to data, information, and any necessary administrative support, to help the panel fulfill its role effectively.
- c. Establish a regular meeting schedule that accommodates the availability of panel members. Make sure meetings are accessible, which may include providing transportation or childcare support.

6. Engagement Practices

- a. Set rules and parameters that create a space where the panel feels comfortable sharing their cultural identity.
- b. Provide flexible schedules and emotional support resources for panelists with trauma in their past to identify, respond to, and prevent emotionally distressing triggers and re-traumatization.
- c. Foster open and honest communication by encouraging constructive dialogue, sharing of differing viewpoints, and demonstrating that the input from the panelists is impactful and essential.
- d. Identify areas of the process where the panel will be actively involved in decision-making and have an equal say in shaping the work's direction.

7. Evaluation and Feedback

- a. Regularly assess the effectiveness of the advisory panel, such as whether goals are being met and efforts are making a positive impact on the behavioral health and justice systems.
- b. Ensure that leadership is held accountable and that leadership also holds their organizations accountable to prioritize meaningful engagement.
- c. Establish mechanisms for panel members to provide feedback on their experience and suggest improvements in the process.