

Partnering Equitably with Communities

to Promote Person-Centered Thinking, Planning & Practice

August 2020

To address disparities and ensure that service systems are person-centered, it's critical to understand what equity and person-centered practice look like from a variety of service-user and cultural perspectives. This brief describes themes and lessons learned from conversations with a variety of stakeholders across the state of North Dakota.

The North Dakota Department of Human Services (ND DHS) is receiving technical assistance from the National Center on Advancing Person-Centered Practices and Systems (NCAPPS) as part of a statewide initiative to enhance overall commitment to person-centered practices for all disability populations it serves or funds. A major component of the NCAPPS work involves strengthening human service systems' relationships with people who use their services by engaging service users more meaningfully and on an ongoing basis to drive and inform systems change, strengthen communication, and build lasting partnerships. These efforts can help ensure that ND DHS policies, procedures, and practices reflect the priorities of people with lived experience.

In the fall of 2019, representatives from ND DHS and NCAPPS visited and spoke with communities throughout North Dakota to exchange ideas about equity and person-centered thinking, planning, and practice. This brief describes the themes and lessons learned from these activities, as well as next steps for ND DHS to continue strengthening its partnerships and working toward a more person-centered system.



Equity in Engagement

Creating equity is one important aspect of strengthening engagement. Equity in engagement means reaching out to people who may not traditionally be engaged in self-advocacy and systems advocacy. Equity also means making sure that underrepresented groups feel welcome and supported to engage with the system.

NCAPPS and the ND DHS are grateful to the following groups and individuals who shared their time and insights through this process:

- Native American Development Center, Bismarck, ND
- Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians Elders, Turtle Mountain Retirement Home
- Standing Rock Elders, Standing Rock Visitor Center
- New American Gathering, Lutheran Social Services, Fargo, ND
- Phyllis Howard, MHA Nation Tribal Elder
- Theresa Grant, Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians

Overarching Themes

Representatives from ND DHS and NCAPPS asked community members what “person-centered” means to them, and what a truly person-centered system would look like. Participants also reflected together on the challenges and opportunities for achieving a statewide person-centered system.

What does “person-centered” look like to ND communities?

Person-centered principles are deeply aligned with many American Indian cultural values.

Many American Indian cultures see health, wellbeing, and community as linked, or one and the same. Respect and compassion for all people as valued community members are integral.

Humility is part of being person-centered. Humility—which is about personal reflection and being open to and thoughtful about other peoples’ experiences—should be shared by everyone participating in the service process, including the people receiving services and people providing services or supports.

The word “**holistic**” is another way to think about person-centeredness. Being person-centered means understanding the whole person including their family and tribal community for tribal populations, their experiences, needs, culture, and values.

A person-centered approach means having someone to talk to, who cares, understands, and—in the words of one participant—“**treats me like a human being.**”

Several participants described having a **mentor or guide** as being important for a person-centered system.

Person-centered services are informed by and **tailored to a person’s way of life, unique skills, talents, hopes, and dreams.**

Person-centered means care and support that is **informed by and honors personal, familial, and cultural values and customs.**

Person-centered services are **trauma informed.** This includes services that are informed by a person’s own experiences, including trauma that may have been experienced by populations who come to the United States as refugees. Being trauma-informed also means that services and providers recognize and respond to the historical and intergenerational traumatic events experienced by American Indian populations.

Person-centered systems provide **support for and acknowledgement of caregivers**, who often make great sacrifices to support their loved ones to live in the community.

Challenges for a person-centered system

Experiences of racism and discrimination frequently came up in these conversations. Participants described instances of feeling judged, dismissed and disrespected by service providers, agency staff, and members of the general public.

Poverty, food insecurity, and lack of access to transportation and safe housing are critical underlying factors for many people we spoke with.

Opportunities for a person-centered system

Those who participated in the conversations saw value in providing opportunities for ND DHS staff and members of American Indian and New American communities to **come together and build mutual understanding and respect**. Through sharing personal stories and experiences, all involved can develop empathy, build trust, and establish connections.

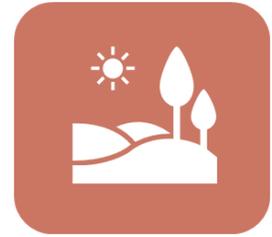
Participants voiced a need for **stronger outreach, more readily available information on offered services, and guidance on where to go or who to contact** when seeking information or support.

Person-centered services have the potential to break the cycle of poverty by building economic skills, self-sufficiency, and fostering connection to families, community and culture.

There is a **lack of knowledge about eligibility for services and**

supports, particularly for New Americans and for people living on tribal lands.

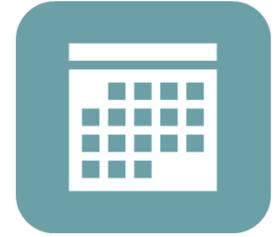
There is **mistrust of the system** among these communities that acts as a barrier to access. This mistrust is rooted in the troubled history of relations between the state and federal governments and tribal people.



Lessons Learned: Time & Resources

To achieve more equitable person-centered practices, DHS must invest time and resources in:

- Understanding and promoting health equity
- Continuously building cultural competence and humility among all ND DHS staff
- Promoting soft skills of human interaction among all ND DHS staff (including listening with openness, respect, patience, and tolerance; conveying kindness through eye contact, friendly greetings, and body language; communicating with empathy; and validating and accepting responses)
- Developing and hiring staff or contracting with community organizations with cultural backgrounds that mirror the populations served
- Promoting culturally specific peer support
- Partnering with community organizations that provide culturally specific services
- Providing timely and culturally relevant information and support to caregivers



For American Indian populations, it is important for ND DHS to:

- Build connections with tribal leadership
- Partner with Native American community organizations
- Ensure all ND DHS staff have an understanding of American Indian cultures, values, and history

For New American populations, it is important for ND DHS to:

- Build connections with members of New American communities
- Partner with New American community organizations
- Ensure access to interpretation services
- Translate informational materials into the languages spoken by New American communities



Lessons Learned: Engagement Best Practices

In this series of engagement, NCAPPS and ND DHS learned several lessons that should inform future engagement efforts with communities throughout the state.

- There was a general sense that these conversations are just the beginning, and there is a desire to **have more dialogue** of this kind.
- Community participants voiced appreciation for the group from ND DHS **meeting with them in their own communities** as opposed to inviting group members to visit Bismarck to talk about engagement and inclusion.
- Participants appreciated that the **conversations were open-ended and respectful** of the participants' knowledge, experiences, and values. There was minimal lecture/presentation on the part of NCAPPS or ND DHS, and it was made clear that the purpose of the meetings was to develop greater understanding.
- Culturally responsive engagement may involve **inviting participants to tell stories**

about their experiences and communities. Using people's experiences as examples can facilitate engagement and discussion.

- Participants expressed hope for **follow-through after the meetings**. Participants described engaging in similar meetings in the past with little or no follow-through or action. A lack of follow-through left participants feeling deflated and mistrustful. Follow-through should include:
 - A summary of what was discussed, including what was heard and the actions that are expected to result
 - A description of how ND DHS intends to use the information moving forward
 - Evidence (whenever possible) that ND DHS is using community feedback to inform system changes
- When sharing materials, be sure those **materials are accessible**. This means breaking down complicated information into plain-language summaries.
- Have key documents **translated into languages other than English** and distribute those documents ahead of an engagement activity. This would help engage people who do not speak English as a first language.
- **Work with providers and community organizations** to share information about engagement opportunities. Potential participants are often more likely to respond to requests for engagement if they are delivered by a trusted provider or community leader.
- Offer optional **pre-meetings to prepare people to engage**, build trust in the process, and understand what's coming.
- Accommodations go a long way in promoting engagement. These may include:
 - Transportation
 - Community meals
 - Interpreters
 - Childcare
 - Holding meetings in spaces where community members feel comfortable
 - Multiple sessions held at different times of the day
 - Opportunities to engage in-person, particularly for people who aren't comfortable using technology to connect
 - Opportunities to engage using videoconference, phone, or social media
 - Opportunities to share written or recorded feedback because not everyone is comfortable sharing stories in public or in front of others. This would mean paper and online options, as some do not have access to the internet or proficiency with a computer

The National Center on Advancing Person-Centered Practices and Systems (NCAPPS) is an initiative from the Administration for Community Living and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to help States, Tribes, and Territories implement U.S. Department of Health and Human Services policy on person-centered thinking, planning, and practice. NCAPPS is administered by the Human Services Research Institute.

