

# Providing Effective Technical Assistance to Small Tribal Organizations



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LESSONS LEARNED

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## LESSONS LEARNED

### INTRODUCTION

Many tribal child welfare agencies are small when defined by the number of their staff but enormous in scope and workload. Especially among the many smaller tribes across the country, there may be only two or three staff who make up the entire agency, conducting investigations, recruiting foster families, providing in-home services, working with state staff on tribal cases and so much more. Directors will frequently cover caseloads and balance their managerial responsibilities with transporting children and court appearances. Housed within a larger Department of Health and Human Services, staff often wear multiple hats and may also coordinate other vital services such as the Food Pantry or domestic violence programs.

Providing effective technical assistance within this context can be a challenge. It is unrealistic to expect staff to meet without emergency interruptions. Directors often have no leadership team (i.e. deputy directors, department heads) to assist with system-level work and implementation responsibilities. The same foundational capacity that is critical to successful work in a larger system – such as leadership, staff development, and administrative structures - all need to be present but are supported by limited staff as opposed to entire departments in larger jurisdictions. There are, however, invaluable benefits to having the entire staff in one room participating in designing their own system, who are often members of the community they serve. The buy-in and dedication to making needed changes is unwavering.

The Northeast and Caribbean Implementation Center, (NCIC) has been one of five regional Child Welfare Implementation Centers in the Children's Bureau Training and Technical Assistance Network. From 2008 through 2014, we were engaged with State and Tribal child welfare agencies to provide resources and support aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of child welfare services for children, youth and families. NCIC's goals were to build capacity to effectively implement and sustain systemic change, facilitate peer-to-peer networking, and support intensive implementation projects. Through this work, we provided technical assistance to the eligible tribes in New England, hosted peer networking calls and gatherings, and partnered on a two-year intensive implementation project with the Wabanaki Tribal Consortium, made up of the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Pleasant Point and the Penobscot Nation. The lessons learned here address our experiences with the phases of implementation ranging from exploration and design to initial implementation.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### EXPLORATION: Dedicate Time to Building Trust and Understanding

NCIC, upon the advice of our tribal consultant, designated substantially more time for outreach with tribal programs than it did with state agencies. While our methods of phone introductions and on-site visits were the same, we allowed an additional year for introducing ourselves and the concept of NCIC to the tribes. Unlike state staff who were familiar with the Training and Technical Assistance Network and frequently had existing relationships with the consultants at NCIC, most of the tribal agencies had little to no experience with the Network or most of the NCIC staff. Beyond this unfamiliarity can be a wariness of government involvement based on the long history of colonization, broken treaties, and detrimental, often destructive, policies. The additional time allowed for a series of calls prior to on-site visits, which built relationships and trust prior to meeting in person. These calls and face to face meetings were important for many reasons. They enabled NCIC staff to better understand each tribes' current system and to aid them in conceptualizing the scope of improvement that we could support on a scale that would work for them. As a result of this deliberate process before the project began, the activities in the tribal intensive implementation project have proceeded as originally planned, often to a greater degree than those in our state projects which did not benefit from this additional exploration. This success was compounded by the technical assistance providers attending as many monthly meetings in each community as possible once the project began, continuing to build relationships.

### DESIGN: Peer Learning and Thought Partners are Vital

Tribal directors reflected on the value of having a wide variety of peers and experts to serve as thought partners, especially during the design phase of the work. As described, they can be isolated in their roles, often not having others to discuss systemic ideas with, build on past experiences, and weigh options. NCIC was deliberate in ensuring not only that the peers and experts were available but that there was ample time devoted to this thinking. We facilitated peer networking calls with all eligible tribes and with state partners, convened a Tribal Gathering, held three full day peer learning events throughout the implementation project, and held a sustainability event in partnership with state peers.

Within the day to day work of the project itself, opportunities for input from those outside the agencies was a critical component of the design. NCIC advised that both members of the consortium develop cross-functional project teams that would be involved in the core work of designing and implementing the changes to their systems. These teams included child welfare staff as well as staff from tribal domestic violence programs, housing departments, law enforcement, former foster youth, young parents, and elders. The teams met monthly, attended the day-long peer learning events, and the NCIC gatherings. These partnerships were critical to developing solutions that positively impacted several departments, building understanding between the staff members, and improving services for children and families.

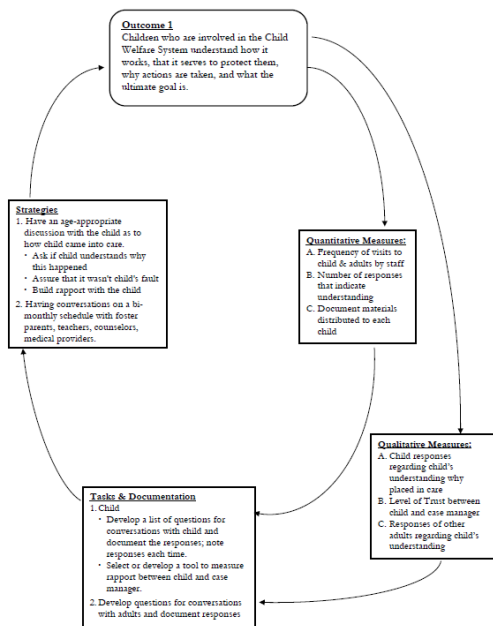
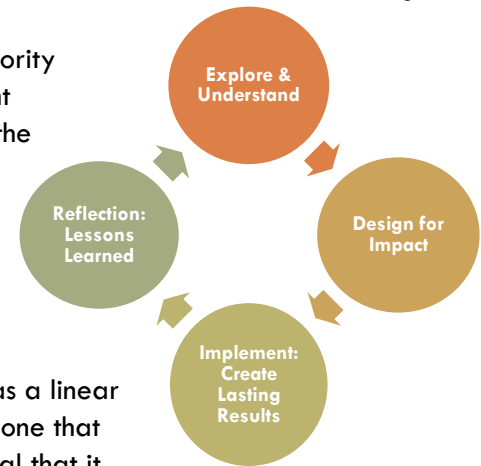
The voice of each community was also incorporated into the design through a series of focus groups, conducted as the first step in the work to gather perceptions and ideas from those who these changes were intended to serve. Groups included foster parents, former youth in care, service providers, and community members. Much of this information was positive but some could be hard to hear; despite this, tribal directors reflected that it served as a critical framework to build upon for the entire two year project. It provided clear focus for the project teams and a direction for their work from day one. The tribal directors also emphasized that activities the teams worked on as a group, such as mapping the process of a case moving through their department or developing a visual of the history of their agency, helped to build understanding and provide avenues for sharing among team members and peers. They were also valuable in helping team members to better see how their individual roles overlaid with one another and those outside of their departments.

These efforts to include the voices of peers extended to the selection of the technical assistance strategies (i.e. practice model development, data system implementation, policy revision). Sample products from other tribes were reviewed and discussed. A director experienced with implementing a practice model in her own tribe presented at a Peer Learning Event. The consortium interviewed tribal staff who were using a database that was under consideration for modifications. This inclusion of peers throughout the design process assisted the teams and technical assistance providers in refining the scope of the work and clarifying the vision of what we were working together to achieve.

## IMPLEMENTATION: Consider Culture in all Aspects of the Work

When providing materials, proposing activities, or bringing in experts, it is critical to consider how these might translate within another culture. Tools and presentations that may have been successful when used in other jurisdictions might not have the expected impact in tribal communities. Implementation frameworks and tools can appear linear in contrast to what the tribes themselves describe as their more circular, holistic way of thinking. We recognized, however, that in many ways, this circular model is one which better represents the realities of implementing change, more accurately depicting ongoing innovation and evaluation. Because of this, the process of adapting proposed interventions and tools was less onerous than anticipated. Developing and implementing a practice model was a natural fit with the tribes' values-based approach to their work. Implementing a data system was technically challenging but because the teams saw it as a tool for "living their values" by tracking the work and outcomes most important to their communities, its importance was clear to all. This work on identifying priority outcomes, however, was deliberate and served not only as an important foundation to embracing the data work but an "aha" moment for both the consortium members and technical assistance providers alike in cross-cultural translation. While technical assistance providers were partially successful in conveying the importance of an agency having clear, measurable goals supported by clearly articulated strategies, it

wasn't until the tribal team members realized they could visualize these outcomes not as a linear set of activities but a circular one that feeds back to the original goal that it became so clear and readily embraced by the group.



When bringing in subject matter experts, the selection of these consultants should be done in partnership with the tribes. NCIC had success when we were able to do this but faced challenges when this was not possible. As a rule, we relied on native experts. If that was not an option, we searched for consultants with experience providing technical assistance in tribal communities. Those without prior experience in working with tribes underwent scrutiny by the tribes; they reviewed their prior work, interviewed them over the phone, and discussed them with trusted tribal consultants. The most successful of these experts entered into the work with humility and a clear intention to understand the tribes and their context (e.g., used the tribe's own data in their presentations and materials), asked

questions, listened intently, and offered technical assistance while inviting feedback. Less successful consultants, presenting to a wider audience and therefore not selected by the tribes, erred by assuming this "client" was like all other jurisdictions and relied too heavily on past expertise. In entering the work without

having curiosity about the uniqueness of the tribes, trust was limited and when a mistake in communication occurred, they quickly lost the confidence of the tribes. NCIC was reminded of the importance of their role in thoughtful and adequate preparation for those involved.

Considering cultural differences was a major component of the work of the on-site, shared Project Coordinator hired to assist with this systemic work. In contrast to state Project Coordinators, she made a concerted effort to be known in the community in order to build their confidence and trust. She met elders immediately and helped serve lunches. She attended funerals in the community. Tribal child welfare work is more rooted in the community than state child welfare systems. In order for her to successfully complete her work, it was imperative that she take the time to build relationships and understand the communities she was working within.

## CONCLUSION

While few technical assistance providers have the luxury of working with agencies for multiple years as NCIC did, these lessons apply even if called upon to provide a single presentation. It is critical to take the extra moment, with curiosity and openness, to make an introductory call or spend fifteen minutes before a presentation to meet face to face. Thinking through tested tools and frameworks to consider their cultural relevance will always be beneficial. Bringing in multiple perspectives and voices is valuable. NCIC found time and again that working with tribal communities did not require that we bring new skills or techniques, only that we were mindful and intentional of those that are best practice with all clients. The importance of playful, reflective partnership was key to the success of this work.