

# ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING AGENCY CONSUMER ADVISORY BOARDS

## BENEFITS OF A CONSUMER ADVISORY BOARD

Consumer Advisory Boards (CABs) are often used at the community-level to gain feedback from those who are currently or formerly homeless on the community's efforts to end homelessness. Agencies serving homeless individuals and families can also benefit from incorporating opportunities to engage consumers by establishing a CAB for their agency. The benefits include:

- Fostering the development of self-determination, leadership skills, and sense of empowerment among consumers;
- Providing clear lines of communication between leadership, staff, and consumers to resolve issues as they arise and better anticipate future consumer needs; and
- Creating a working partnership between consumers and providers to inform policy development and improve the quality and types of services provided.

## BEST PRACTICES FOR FORMING A CONSUMER ADVISORY BOARD

- **Determine the Goals and Purpose** – CABs can be utilized for a variety of purposes including providing input on the agency's services, advising leadership how to best meet consumer needs, providing a channel for feedback and concerns about policies from other consumers, and advocating for people experiencing homelessness within the agency and in the broader community. CABs should have significant and meaningful input into the operations of the agency. However, CABs are often not decision-making bodies but instead act in an advisory role, working in partnership with the agency's leadership.
- **Get Buy-in from Board Members and Senior Leadership** – For the CAB to have a meaningful impact on the agency's programs and policy, support from leadership is needed. In addition to recognizing the value of developing and maintaining a CAB, a member of the board of directors should regularly attend CAB meetings and report back to the board. Agencies seeking to elevate consumers' voices further can include consumers on the governing board. Multiple current and former consumers should be included to avoid "tokenism" and ensure that consumers' input is heard.
- **Provide Staff Support** – Organizational support is essential to the effective operation of a CAB. Agency staff can support the CAB by providing a place to hold meetings, assisting with organizing meetings, taking minutes, and providing reminders about upcoming

meetings. Agency staff can help set agenda items for CAB input, such as proposed policy changes or implementation of new programs, but should also include opportunities for members to raise issues for discussion.

- **Ensure the CAB is Representative** – Consumers participating in the CAB should be people currently or formerly experiencing homelessness and be current or former recipients of services from the agency. The CAB should also be representative of its constituency and consider the different preferences, needs, and experiences of individuals. Depending on whom the agency serves, this could include members of families, individuals, people with physical disabilities, and those utilizing mental health or substance abuse services. Other considerations could be age, gender, sexual orientation, or veteran status.

The size of a CAB can depend on the size of the population to be represented. It is recommended to start small and add members, if necessary, to be representative of the population of consumers the agency serves. Odd numbers, potentially seven or nine members, are suggested to prevent ties on issues that may require a vote.

- **Recruit and Orient New Members** – CAB members can be recruited in a number of ways including nominations from staff or other program participants, or drawn from other programs within the agency. New members will need to be introduced to the purpose and functions of the CAB and provided guidance. Orientation materials should provide an overview of the organization, its basic structures, and a breakdown of programs, employees, volunteers and clients.

Some organizations may find it difficult to recruit CAB members. To cultivate a pool of potential members, agencies can develop a “ladder of engagement” for consumers to take on an increasingly active role, if desired. For example, clients could move from low-commitment activities such as participating in surveys or focus groups to more active engagement such as CAB membership.

- **Formalize the Role of the CAB and Responsibilities of Members** – Once the CAB has established goals and roles, these should be formalized in writing, including member expectations, such as meeting attendance. Meeting frequency, potentially quarterly or monthly, should be determined as well.
- **Remove Barriers to Participation** - Meetings should, to the extent possible, be held at the same place, day of the week and time each month, that is accessible to homeless participants. In addition, special consideration should be made to accommodate participants with disabilities and language translation should be offered to ensure that participants with limited English proficiency can fully contribute. Members can also be encouraged to participate by providing financial incentives, such as gift cards and transportation costs, or by serving meals and providing childcare during meetings.

## OTHER OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONSUMER PARTICIPATION

With or without a CAB, incorporating a variety of mechanisms for consumer feedback into the agency's systems and policies is crucial—as is dedicating the resources necessary to support consumer engagement. To increase consumer participation, agencies can consider processes such as:

- Including multiple consumers on the board of directors to ensure consumer input in all areas of decision-making.
- Providing opportunities for consumers to interact with the board of directors and leadership to allow for active, in-person conversation with decision-makers.
- Holding open town hall-style meetings or smaller focus groups to hear directly from consumers.
- Creating a newsletter to provide updates to consumers on policies, programs, and services.
- Seeking feedback through surveys or comment cards on specific topics or to better understand consumer needs.

## SOURCES & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

“How to Develop and Maintain Consumer Advisory Boards.” National Consumer Support Technical Assistance Center of the National Mental Health Association.

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“Best Practices for Meaningful Consumer Input in New Health Care Delivery Models.” Community Catalyst. [https://www.communitycatalyst.org/doc-store/publications/meaningfulconsumerinput\\_healthcaredeliverymodels.pdf](https://www.communitycatalyst.org/doc-store/publications/meaningfulconsumerinput_healthcaredeliverymodels.pdf)

“Consumer Advisory Board Handbook.” (2011). Massachusetts Dept. of Public Health, Office of HIV/AIDS. <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dph/aids/swcab-handbook.pdf>