

# Fact Sheet: Findings on Family Engagement from California Research Bureau



Now more than ever, it is critical that youth and families contribute to policy decision-making in child-serving programs. Evidence shows that meaningful family engagement in policymaking helps government more effectively support children and families, improving children's outcomes. For example, outreach efforts to parents with children enrolled in Medi-Cal are more effective when caregiver representatives regularly provide input on draft communications and the most efficient methods to reach families. *Meaningful* engagement is demonstrated when families are intentionally included in decision-making and empowered to be full partners.

In the Fall of 2019, the California Research Bureau (CRB) investigated the extent to which the state's child-serving departments and agencies incorporate meaningful input from caregivers and youth in policymaking. As part of the California State Library, the CRB provides independent, nonpartisan research and analysis for the Governor, Legislature, and other Constitutional officers.

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## SCOPE OF CRB FAMILY ENGAGEMENT ANALYSIS

The CRB identified the 53 boards and committees that are primarily focused on serving children, within 14 agencies and departments (including Corrections and Rehabilitation, Social Services, Education, Public Health, Developmental Services, Health Care Services, and the Mental Health Services Oversight & Accountability Commission). For each of these boards and committees, the CRB examined the following:

- Is there a dedicated seat on the board/committee for one or more caregiver or youth representatives? How many?
- What is the role of the group? Is it an advisory, planning, or governing body?
- What is the method of appointment for the caregiver/youth seat(s)?
- What, if any, are the requirements for appointment to those seats?
- Is there a stipend or per diem for caregiver/youth participation, and/or are expenses reimbursed?
- What, if any, logistical support is provided to caregivers/youth for participation on the board or committee? For example, teleconference options, interpreters, meeting summaries, travel arrangement assistance, etc.
- Does the board/committee maintain partnerships with outside organizations (such as family support groups) that can provide technical assistance to caregivers/youth?
- By what authority is the board/committee established?

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The CRB research shows that California state government includes some bright spots of meaningful family engagement, but they are sporadic and not common practice throughout all child-serving agencies.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONTINUED

- Two-thirds of the boards/committees identified by CRB are in an advisory role only, not planning or governing.
- Stipends or per diem allowances are uncommon, as they are provided by just 19% of the boards/committees.
- It is more common (but still not routine) for family representatives to be reimbursed for travel, child care, or other expenses related to participation; 38% of the boards/committees identified by CRB included reimbursement.
- Most boards and committees that include family representatives have one or two such seats. There are notable exceptions with more seats for family or youth representatives, such as:
  - Advisory Commission on Special Education (unspecified number, but several)
  - Medi-Cal Children's Health Advisory Panel (four seats)
  - Early Childhood Policy Council Parent Advisory Committee (all seats)
  - State Interagency Coordinating Council on Early Intervention (at least 20% of all seats)
  - State Council on Developmental Disabilities (at least 7 seats)
- Commendably, most of the boards and committees provide departmental staff support for logistical or technical assistance for family representatives.
- However, only a handful of the committees partner with family support organizations to ensure family/youth representatives have resources to turn to for additional information.

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## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

California state government needs to build on the California Research Bureau findings to better understand where there are missed opportunities to improve programs and services by engaging families in ongoing, meaningful policymaking discussions. Additional research is required to examine how family engagement on policymaking boards and committees can support better outcomes for children and their caregivers. A forthcoming analysis from the Legislative Analyst's Office will shed more light on these issues.

It is not enough to give parents/caregivers seats to participate in policymaking committees. To be meaningful, family engagement in policymaking must be:

- **Representative**, with more than one or two family members included on a policymaking body.
- **Supported**, with technical and substantive assistance provided to family members so that they can fully participate in a policymaking conversation that is not directly related to their day-to-day jobs.
- **Fairly compensated**, with travel and child care reimbursements as well as per diem allowances or stipends to compensate family members for time and expertise.
- **Family-friendly**, with meetings at times and locations that are accessible to working caregivers.

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