

GUIDE AND TOOLKIT

AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF OUR CHILDREN'S CAREGIVERS THROUGH FAMILY COUNCILS



Acknowledgments

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FRESHFARM, in partnership with Share Our Strength, developed this toolkit to inform organizations on how to implement family councils in their own areas.

The creation of this toolkit was informed by a 9-month community-driven Early Childhood Family Council (ECFC), in Washington DC Wards 7 and 8, to identify community needs and strategies to increase food security and community well-being. This project was led by FRESHFARM and funded by Share Our Strength.

This toolkit was developed by Martine Hippolyte, FRESHFARM.

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This toolkit would not have been possible without the council members who joined the council and shared their experiences.

Overview

Family councils are a community-driven process designed to amplify parents’ and caregivers’ voices by structuring opportunities for them to:

- Share their experiences and give input in an open and safe environment;
- Participate in authentic listening with an equity lens; and
- Guide the development of a proposal or idea that addresses needs they have identified.

This strategy was pilot tested in Washington DC with a group of community members living in Wards 7 and 8. Participants had a positive experience with the council and expressed that the council was a refreshing experience, allowing them to learn from others, connect with new people, and exchange resources and information. Participants expressed genuine enjoyment from participation in the council and even expressed that their engagement led to connections with other council members being formed outside of the council meeting space. One participant shared their experience,

“One of the things from the first initial meeting that we had that really stuck with me is...when we meet with funders or people who want to do some sort of work in your community or the space where you are, they kind of come in with their own ideas of what they want to do and not really thinking about what the people there need. And so that's always kind of been my driving force so to speak as to why I'm involved in the community work that I'm involved in. And so, since being a part of the council I've decided to...run for community organization president. Because a lot of times, like I say, in my own community people come in and they're just like, “This is what we want to do. This is what we want to put here.” And it's just kind of like, “Do you like it?” Not necessarily like, “Do you need it? Or no questions about it beforehand. And so, it's really helped me to think more about that. Thinking more about what my community needs, thinking more about what the parents I serve need.”

Below is a step-by-step guide to the recruitment, facilitation, and evaluation process of a Council. This is intended to be a guide and should be tailored to the community you are working with.

This toolkit is divided into four phases:

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Phase 1: Outreach and Recruitment

Goal: Connect with stakeholders in communities and recruit diverse group members.

Timeframe: 2 months

Activities	Facilitator Notes
<p>1. Develop recruitment criteria and strategy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recruitment should be a multisector outreach approach. Some areas to reach out to could include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Recreation Centers ○ Churches ○ Schools/early childcare Centers ○ Community-based organizations ○ Note: Due to capacity, staff members at these above organizations don't always have time to do outreach. If that is the case, try transitioning to a strategy of direct outreach by asking directly for individuals' contact information and reaching out to individuals who had participated in previous initiatives. ● Low-Barrier to entry criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Council members need to have a direct connection to the community that is being served (for example, live in the community, have a child or grandchild in an ECE center within that community, and are active community members in the local network).
<p>2. Establish incentive type and amount</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Compensate council members for contributing their time and expertise. Based on experience and market research, it is recommended that a \$50 incentive is offered for each interview and council meeting. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Council members were able to choose whether their incentive was in the form of a gift card or a direct deposit payment to have agency over the form in which they could receive their compensation.
<p>3. Conduct outreach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Always over recruit. If you are looking to have a council of 12 people, try and recruit at least 50. use a multi-sector recruitment approach to maximize the diversity of Council members. ● Maintained intentionality in word usage on fliers, emails, and calls to reduce potential intimidation. For example, eliminating words such as "stakeholder," or "activist."

Activities	Facilitator Notes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Recruitment language may need to be altered out of the recognition that not all participants see themselves as activists or recognize their capacity for activism.
4. Design evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Designed evaluation in consultation with external evaluation partners to focus on metrics for success, unbiased synthesis of Council discussions, and an equity-focused process to develop recommendations utilizing a participatory approach to evaluation. ● Determine your metrics for success. For example, they could be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Parents and caregivers commit to the process by attending meetings consistently and participating with honesty, empathy, introspection, and humility ○ The Council develops an agreed-on initiative or project to address food security and/or community wellness <p>*Additional evaluation details found in Phase 4</p>

***Evaluation Highlight:**

- Recruitment:
 - To maximize diversity in Council participation, the facilitator took a multi-sector approach to recruit council members by reaching out to churches, childcare centers, parks, recreation centers, and community centers for referrals. The facilitator noted that while they encountered a lot of interest from the staff at community-based organizations, it was challenging for staff to carve out time to do outreach for the Council on the facilitator’s behalf. Given this challenge, the facilitator transitioned to a strategy of direct outreach by asking directly for individuals’ contact information and reaching out to individuals who had participated in previous initiatives.
 - The diversity of the council was in alignment with the initial desires of council members, as members identified that they would like to see a diverse group of members regarding background, family structures, socioeconomic status, leadership experience, and connections with DC.
 - Adapted recruitment language out of a recognition that not all participants see themselves as an activist or recognize their capacity for activism

Phase 2: Onboarding & Interviews

Goal: Deeply understand parents and caregivers individually and as council members, and create parameters and initial direction for Council meetings.

Timeframe: 2 months

Activities	Facilitator Notes
1. Hold and facilitate an orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conduct an optional virtual or in-person orientation to introduce potential Council members to the goal of the council and the expectations of participation. ● The orientation serves as an informal focus group where participants provide feedback on the desired trajectory of the council. ● The orientation also serves as a participation indicator because it is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Not incentivized ○ Optional ○ Not a qualifying event
2. Participation confirmation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ask potential council members to confirm participation in orientation and council by email along with desired incentive payment method.
3. Schedule a one-on-one interview for each council member	<p>The goal of a one-on-one interview is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have participants individually schedule the time and day of their one-on-one interviews by completing a stand-alone survey sent out via email. ● Have participants select whether they would like to have an interview on the phone or write their responses via email so that participants can provide responses in the way they are most comfortable.
3. Facilitate one-on-one interviews for each council member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Example interview questions to be answered via phone call or email: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Where are you from originally? ○ Tell me about your family! ○ If I talked to your best friend, what three words would they use to describe you? ○ How do you define success? ○ How do you define happiness? ○ How do you define health? ○ What is your biggest wish for your children?

Activities	Facilitator Notes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What is most appealing about the Family Council? ○ What would you like to see in our meetings? ○ What was your worst meeting experience? ● Have the facilitator of the council share their interview responses before the first council meeting to build trust, rapport, and familiarity with Council members.
3. Define parameters of the Council meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● After each council meeting, we sent a feedback survey that asked participants to share preferred meeting dates and times for future meetings.

***Evaluation Notes:**

- Interviews
 - The facilitator noticed that she received more rich and detailed information from the email questionnaire as compared to the interview process, observing that participants who responded by email may have felt less pressure to perform than individuals who were engaging in the live interview conversations.
 - The facilitator style is guided by the interview data collected before the council meetings. Within these interviews, participants described what they would like to see during the ECFC meetings

Phase 3: Council Meetings

Goal:

Create and maintain a space where community voices can be heard and inform the pace and direction of council meeting content. Facilitators will lead conversations and share information and activities that will encourage openness, community, and non-judgemental, critical thinking. Members can share in their interviews what they would like to see during these council meetings while we build up to the big questions.

Timeframe: 5 months

Activities

- Review one-on-one interview responses
- Establish a touchpoint schedule most appropriate for Council members
- Define the “big” questions
- Design the structure of meetings
- Identify each meeting focus
- Remain cognizant of the facilitation style
- Identify Group norms collaboratively with Council Members

Evaluation Notes:

Phase 3 focused on implementing the Council meetings, and developing themes for each meeting to help serve the direction and focus for the meetings.

- Meetings should be an open forum for discussion, which allows for community development to occur while generating insights and exchanging knowledge.
- The timeline for the meetings can be generated based on the discussion and flow of the previous meetings, with some themes overlapping and being discussed across multiple meetings.
- This phase focuses on the identification of community needs and issues that should be addressed.
- Six meetings are the right amount of time to develop group rapport, identify needs, and develop recommendations.

Facilitators should be creating a space where participants build connections with each other and feel comfortable expressing their needs and visions.

- Each meeting should include a group-building activity designed to build rapport and personal connections among group members and then a discussion related to the meeting theme.
- Below are some tools facilitators should follow to help guide the council meetings:

Acknowledgment:

Actively develop individual relationships with council members. Get to know council members on a first-name basis and engage them in conversations about topics related to their life

outside of the Council. During discussions, ask some participants directly what they would like. At the end of the discussions, invite final input.

Shared Language:

When introducing a new activity, provide examples for each exercise to increase shared language and understanding, as well as inclusion. ask if anyone needs help with the terminology used.

Personability:

Respond directly to each individual when they participate in an activity or discussion. Make discussions relatable by sharing personal experiences and promoting the discussion of personal experiences by members of the group.

Reducing Pressure to Perform:

With each new activity or discussion, give council members time to think about their responses. Assure participants that participation is optional and that they are welcome to forgo participation if they would like. With these guidelines in place, council members were excited to get involved in the discussion.

Culturally Relevant Facilitators:

Facilitators are reflective of the community that is being served and are passionate about investing in the community. For example, in DC, Martine's positionality as a Black woman with experience living and working in the DC region, her investment in the community and issues relating to food insecurity, and her passion for food equity and community-led programming made her uniquely qualified to facilitate the ECFC and contributed to her ability to lead meetings in a culturally relevant way. Martine's positionality as a member of the DMV area and a passionately involved advocate for food justice served well in her culturally relevant and responsive facilitation style.

Validation:

Respond directly to each individual when they participate in a discussion or activity in a positive way. acknowledge awkward social interactions (e.g., interrupting others) in a personable way that promotes sociality among the group.

Authentic Listening:

Make sure not to negate or minimize anyone's responses through authentic listening, acknowledgment, and validation.

Phase 4: Evaluate and Plan

Goal: Evaluate and analyze the family council processes from start to finish. Create a plan that authentically reflects guidance and feedback from council members. Collaborate with partners to plan for funding and implementation of the plan generated by the council.

Timeframe: 9 months/duration of the project

Guiding Questions:

- How was the council developed? How did X organization create a centered space? How did members of the council engage in the space?
- How did program facilitators help to create a space that is open, safe, and promotes authentic listening from an equity lens? What recommendations emerged from this process? How did facilitators support the creation of recommendations that were culturally relevant and community-driven?
- What results/observed changes did the council perceive as a result of participating in the council meetings? What strategies would the council recommend incorporating? What resources do they need to do so?

What are the intended goals related to reducing food insecurity and increasing access to and consumption of healthy foods?

Methods:

- Council Meeting Documentation and Analysis: process and outcomes of council meetings are documented by the facilitator and team; additionally, process evaluation notes regarding the organization and facilitation of the council were generated through researchers regularly meeting with facilitation team members
- Synthesis and Analysis of Council Meeting Documentation: document each council meeting and synthesize and analyze to develop themes from meeting conversations, and to adequately assess needs and desired outcomes

Focus Group: a member of the research team conducts a focus group with meeting participants as part of a council meeting session

Key Findings:

- The importance of a culturally-relevant, community-led space for developing community-based recommendations for increasing food security
- The need for more accessible, inclusive, and culturally relevant food access initiatives

The importance of taking a multi-level and multi-sectoral approach to supporting community well-being

Evaluation:

During Phase 4, Council participants should move from identifying needs to generating recommendations.

- During the phases note that external commitments and exhaustion levels of the council members can vary. If this happens, work to establish group norms of self-care and authentic autonomy in the meeting space.
- One strategy to use to communicate how much you valued each member's participation is to minimize the number of times you email the group or "reply all" in favor of sending individual emails to Council participants and embedding personalized notes in the messages.
- Emphasize to the group the norm of being able to say "no" to reinforce the emphasis on self-care and authentic autonomy.

The facilitation style should also extend to collaborative work with any evaluators on the evaluation process.

- Work collaboratively with the evaluators on the evaluation of the council process and recommendations.
- The evaluation should intentionally respect the capacity and bandwidth of the council members, in an effort to cultivate authenticity that is reflective of the council experience.

An evaluation team member should conduct a focus group with participants during their fifth meeting. During this focus group, evaluators should ask participants to reflect on how the council has impacted their personal goals and how these goals have changed or maintained as a result of their participation.

- Participants reflect on their experiences with generating recommendations and describe how well they felt their recommendations were acknowledged and validated during the council meetings

Take a participatory approach to the evaluation by sharing leadership and decision-making in the evaluation process:

- Engage participants in conversations to build connections
- Reflect on the needs of children and parents
- Develop recommendations to better support families with young children
- Facilitators documented each meeting by recording detailed notes about coalition members' statements as they participated in activities and discussions.
- A member of a research/evaluation team attends one or more meetings to document the coalition's process.

- Members of the research/evaluation team conduct an informal interview with facilitators at the end of the project to better understand how the Council worked in practice.
- The research/evaluation team analyzed the documentation from each of these meetings to better understand how the coalition was implemented and the outcomes it achieved in its first year.