

Children's Bureau Advancing Equity and Inclusion Through the Child and Family Services Reviews

White House Executive Order 13985¹ elevates the focus on advancing racial equity and support for underserved and adversely affected communities through the federal government. This includes people of color, people who identify as LGBTQ+, children and families living with persistent poverty, and other individuals who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and otherwise not provided fair, just, and impartial treatment.² Ensuring that child welfare is serving all people equitably, and with respect for all individuals, is essential to our work at the Children's Bureau (CB).³

Leading With Equity

When we lead with an equity focus, we improve the system as a whole for all children and families. The Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) are designed to determine states' compliance with titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act, and to evaluate child welfare system performance and require states to make improvement in outcomes for children and families. To create a system that is effective and equitable for all, we must pay particular attention to the experiences of those who may be marginalized and more likely to have disparate outcomes. Applying an equity lens in the CFSR and beyond—from the statewide assessment to the Program Improvement Plan—is essential to accurately assessing, identifying, and addressing system-wide improvement needs. During Round 4 of the CFSR, there will be a focus on using data and evidence to identify disparities in services and outcomes; understand the role that child welfare programs, policies, and practices may play in contributing to those disparities; and inform and develop systemic improvements.

Engaging families and young people with lived experience, as well as other system partners⁴ and individuals with a vested interest in the child welfare system, is a cornerstone of all phases of the CFSR. This principle is grounded in the knowledge that a child welfare system is most effective in achieving its vision and goals to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families when all partners who have a role in it contribute to its design and operation. Engaging diverse individuals with lived expertise, particularly those who may be at risk of negative outcomes, is vital to the process. Individuals with lived expertise have unique insight that are critical to

¹ Executive Order No. 13985, 3 C.F.R. 7009 (2021).

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/>

² Executive Order No. 13985.

³ Associate Commissioner. (2021, August 3). Letter on equity to child welfare leaders. Children's Bureau. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/Letter-from-aysha-schomburg.pdf>

⁴ System partners include, but are not limited to, Tribes, judicial and legal communities, agency caseworkers and supervisors, resource families, private agencies, service providers, federal partners, and communities.

understanding what is working well and where systems lack sensitivity to the experiences of those in marginalized populations. Additionally, it is important to ensure that other system partners and stakeholders participating in the CFSR represent the diversity of individuals and families who live in the community and are served by the system.

Equity and Inclusion Terminology

It is important to develop a shared understanding of terms used when making observations, discussing findings and concerns, and developing and implementing action plans to advance equity and inclusion. Below are proposed definitions for terms used in this briefing.

Disparity: the unequal outcomes of one racial or ethnic group compared with outcomes for another racial or ethnic group.⁵

Disproportionality: the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group compared with its percentage in the total population.⁶

Diversity: the practice of including the many communities, identities, races, ethnicities, backgrounds, abilities, cultures, and beliefs of the American people, including underserved communities.⁷

Equity: Consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.⁸

Inclusion: How diversity is leveraged to create a fair, equitable, healthy, and high-performing organization or community where all individuals are respected, feel engaged and motivated, and have their contributions toward meeting organizational and societal goals valued.⁹

Underserved and marginalized populations: Populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life, as exemplified by the list in the preceding definition of “equity.”¹⁰

⁵ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). *Child welfare practice to address racial disproportionality and disparity*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/racial_disproportionality.pdf

⁶ *Child welfare practice*.

⁷ Executive Order No. 14035 3 C.F.R. 34593 (2021).

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/25/executive-order-on-diversity-equity-inclusion-and-accessibility-in-the-federal-workforce/>

⁸ Executive Order No. 13985.

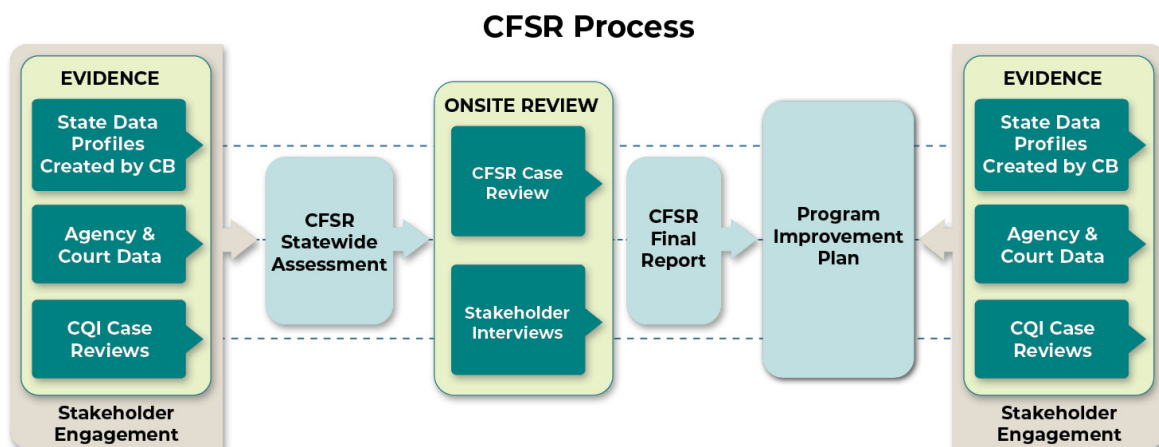
⁹ Austin Community College. (2022). *Equity, diversity, and inclusion: What is inclusion?* <https://researchguides.austincc.edu/c.php?g=522627&p=7624731>

¹⁰ Executive Order No. 13985.

Applying an Equity and Inclusion Framework to the CFSR

The CFSR is a joint effort between federal and state staff, and involves a multi-phase process of assessing and making improvement on seven outcomes, in the domains of Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being, and seven systemic factors. The systemic factors refer to seven systems operating within a child welfare system that have the capacity, if well-functioning, to promote these outcomes.

The CFSR begins with the statewide assessment, which provides an opportunity for states to gather and analyze quantitative and qualitative data and evidence to evaluate their child welfare system. The onsite review phase of the CFSR includes (1) case reviews, which include interviews with key case participants, and (2) interviews with child welfare system stakeholders and partners, including youth and parents with lived experience, resource families, all levels of child welfare agency personnel, service providers, members of the legal and judicial communities, Tribal representatives, and advisory boards. After the onsite review, the CB issues a CFSR Final Report to the state. States determined not to be in substantial conformity with one or more of the seven outcomes and seven systemic factors are required to develop a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to address all areas of nonconformity.



The process provides numerous opportunities for state child welfare agencies and system partners to intentionally examine and advance equity and inclusion within the child welfare system. This can be done by applying equity and inclusion principles throughout each phase of the CFSR, PIP, and ongoing CQI change and implementation processes. Examples of this include:

- Selecting sites for review that reflect the race, ethnicity, and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequity in the state's child welfare system
- Advocating case review teams and stakeholder interview groups that reflect the diversity of the populations served by the agency
- Meaningfully engaging an array of system partners and individuals with a vested interest in the system, including individuals with lived experience who represent the diversity of individuals and families who live in the community and are served by the system

- Collecting, generating, and analyzing disaggregated program and administrative data to identify disparities in services and outcomes; to understand the role that child welfare programs, policies, and practices may play in contributing to those disparities; and to inform and develop system improvements
- Examining underlying reasons for differences in experiences and outcomes for sub-populations, including persons of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequity in the state’s child welfare system
- Identifying and implementing strategies and interventions that help reduce disparities in outcomes for different populations served
- Considering the impact of proposed policies, programs, practices, strategies, or decisions on those who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequity in the state’s child welfare system
- Developing and reporting on measures of the degree to which improvements at the state level translate into improvements for all populations
- Involving an array of system partners and individuals with a vested interest in the system in assessing progress and the need for adjustment

States are at different stages of establishing and applying equity and inclusion frameworks and action plans. The table below lists helpful equity and inclusion-centered questions to consider for each of the phases of the CFSR process:¹¹

CFSR Phase	Equity and Inclusion-Centered Questions to Ask
All Phases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is equity being examined and addressed throughout the process and at key decision points of the CFSR? • Are persons of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequity in the state’s child welfare system at the table throughout the process? If not, who is missing? • How well are young people and families with lived experience represented at the table? How are they supported to participate in the process, and given a voice? Do they reflect an array of opinions about, and experiences with, the child welfare system? • How are individuals selected to participate at each phase of the process? Who is selecting the individuals?

¹¹ Some questions were adapted from (1) Stamey Street Consultant Group. (2021). *What’s race got to do with it?* <https://stameystreet.com/tools/> and (2) Capacity Building Center for States. (2021). *Focusing on race equity throughout change and implementation.* <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/resources/change-implementation-focusing-on-race-equity>

CFSR Phase	Equity and Inclusion-Centered Questions to Ask
Statewide Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For which populations is data disaggregated and examined? What populations are missing and how can the gap be resolved? • How do data collection and findings of the assessment affect populations and the array of communities served? • Do the data show evidence of disproportionality and disparity? If so, what are the likely causes? Given the causes identified, what in turn causes them? • How are the observations, priority areas of focus, findings of root cause analysis, and statewide assessment results perceived by persons of color and others who have been marginalized and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequity in the state's child welfare system? • Do the process, results, written summary, and plan to share/communicate results of the assessment worsen or ignore existing inequities? • Based on the above responses, what changes are needed?
Onsite Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the site selection proposal identify areas of the state that are challenged by overrepresentation and disparity in outcomes for children of color and individuals from historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequity in the state's child welfare system? If so, which site(s) recommended for review will help the state understand potential contributing factors? • Do sites for case review reflect the diverse populations served by the state's child welfare system? • Do case review teams reflect the diversity of populations served by the agency? • Do stakeholders to be interviewed include a broad array of system partners and individuals who work in and have lived experience with the child welfare system, including persons of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequity in the state's child welfare system? How are stakeholders to be selected and interviewed, and by whom?

CFSR Phase	Equity and Inclusion-Centered Questions to Ask
Final Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are observations regarding inequities identified during the review reflected upon and presented in the Final Reports? To what extent are these observations discussed openly within the states, Tribes, legal and judicial communities, persons with vested interest in the system, and persons within and who have lived experience with the system, including people of color and others from underserved and marginalized populations? • How do the findings of the CFSR affect persons of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequity in the state’s child welfare system? • How are the observations in the Final Report and corresponding information shared with and perceived by system partners and others with a vested interest in the child welfare system? • Are populations most affected by the child welfare system included in the target audience to receive results of the CFSR? If not, who is missing? • Do observations and plans to share/communicate results worsen or ignore existing inequities? • Based on the above responses, what changes are needed?
Program Improvement Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the people most affected by a problem involved in the problem-solving and program improvement process? What actions will be taken to support an equal voice for those involved in the process? • Is the PIP development process and schedule considerate of those whose voices need to be included? • Does the plan include strategies or interventions to advance equity and address disproportionalities and disparities indicated in CFSR results? • How do proposed PIP strategies address the systemic reasons—structures, programs, policies, practices, staffing, leadership—that contribute to inequities? • Is there evidence that an identified intervention or strategy will be effective for the target population? • Is there potential for the identified strategy or intervention to create additional disparities? • Is there meaningful engagement of Tribes, stakeholders, persons of color and other marginalized groups during the implementation process to discuss potential adjustments needed to the intervention and/or strategy? • Are information and data being collected, shared, and discussed in a transparent way that considers the impact of implemented strategies or interventions?

Conclusion

Advancing equity requires a systematic approach to identifying and understanding variation in the experiences and outcomes of different populations. It requires consideration of potential evidence of disparities in decision-making, programs, and policies that contribute to inequity in services and outcomes for historically underserved and marginalized populations. It also requires honest and open dialogue to begin to understand the nature and causes of intentional and unintentional biases that may contribute to the disproportionalities and disparities observed in the aggregate and case review data and collected from stakeholder interviews.

The Children's Bureau is committed to advancing equity and inclusion through the CFSR. States are encouraged to contact your [Children's Bureau Regional Office](#) for additional resources and/or technical assistance.