



Centering Equity in the Multidisciplinary Response to Child Maltreatment: A Framework for CAC Case Review

Background

Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) hold a unique position in the systems and structures that respond to child maltreatment. As critical members and leaders of their Multidisciplinary Teams (MDTs), CACs can greatly affect how children and families gain access to services, the cultural responsiveness of those services, and the sense of inclusion felt while moving through the intervention and investigation of child abuse. The CAC/MDT case review is one of the most important venues in which issues of equity and inclusion can be navigated. However, CACs regularly report that these discussions are ignored, avoided, or are sometimes harmful to the partners at the table.

Case reviews vary in dynamic, structure, and frequency depending on the community, but they are a required component of the CAC model in the National Children's Alliance (NCA) Standards for Accreditation.¹ Every component of the MDT – including the CAC – must be present and participatory in an active decision-making process regarding the children and families being seen at the CAC. The case review setting is critical when it comes to equity in access to and cultural responsiveness of services for the following reasons:

- It is a required setting where CAC referral sources are all at the table and can discuss pathways to services.
- Agency decision-makers are often in attendance and can make critical adjustments to protocols or bring back important information to respective organizations.
- Critical referrals to wraparound services are identified during the process.
- It is a forum where training needs are both identified and met, often with the help of CAC leadership.
- It is a setting where key members of the community come together to learn more about each other and the people they serve.

To take advantage of case review's potential to improve equity in access to services and the cultural responsiveness of those services, Midwest Regional CAC (MRCAC) developed a framework that offers a number of options for CAC leaders, MDT facilitators, and MDT representatives to center these concepts. It is the hope that in using some of the tools that follow, CACs and MDTs can better utilize their case review meetings to ensure that a child's

identity does not affect their access to services and that the services they receive are individually and culturally relevant.

Assumptions and Considerations

There are a number of assumptions and considerations that should guide how a CAC leader, MDT facilitator, or MDT member might engage with this framework.

1. **Disparities in access to services and disproportionality within the child welfare system exist.**

Children and families from non-dominant backgrounds are overall more likely to have contact with the child welfare system² while also receiving less access to mental health services.³

2. **Not all communities, CACs, and MDTs are at the same place when it comes to engaging on issues of equity and inclusion.**

Depending on several factors, a CAC and MDT might be ready for different degrees of change to a case review process. A team with little experience discussing issues pertaining to structural/institutional racism, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and all factors of intersectional identity, or a team where there might be outright combativeness towards these issues can choose to introduce these ideas slowly.

3. **Attitudes towards equity and inclusion can change, and systems can be fairer.**

Doing this work is worth it because children and families deserve to be happy and healthy even when systems have historically disadvantaged them. We know that people can increase their cultural competence, evolve in their attitudes towards others, and can build new policies and practices that will improve the experiences for children and families from non-dominant cultures.

Questions for Centering Equity

One way to center the value of equity in your case review is to ask questions about each case that help the team root out how a child and family's identity might have affected how they moved through the CAC system and how services were received. This set of questions can be particularly helpful for an MDT facilitator who is looking to start normalizing discussions around identity in the case review setting. This can be a good first option for a team that has little experience discussing issues of equity or where there might be members of the MDT who have expressed intolerant values in the past. While it is critically important to directly challenge these members of the team, it will not always be possible when balancing the psychological safety of the entire team. Injecting a few of these questions while discussing cases can help increase the degree of comfort and fluency in discussing issues of equity while also helping the facilitator identify challenge points and opportunities for growth.

Key questions

- Are we creating a bridge or a barrier to services through this case decision? For whom?
- Who is at the table? Who isn't? When there's a critical voice missing, what are we going to do about it?
- How is our privilege as systems representatives playing out in this case?
- What lens are we using as we review this case? Whose lens is it?
- Who is benefitting here? Who might be harmed intentionally or unintentionally?
- What would this process look like in a different community?
- Are there power imbalances in this group? Can we name them?
- Are we making a decision out of fear? Can we name that fear?

Not all questions will be relevant in each case. It can be wise for a team facilitator to have these in front of them throughout a case review until they become fluent in their use and even add additional questions that help the team dig deeper. A team can also consider handing these questions to all MDT members to help develop a team culture where everyone can take ownership over centering issues of identity and systems equity.

It is recommended that team facilitators keep a log of the powerful questions that really worked in fostering rich discussions about equity and inclusion. This can then be shared with new facilitators who join the team.

Developing MDT Values and Case Review Agreements

For an MDT that is actively interested in exploring issues of systems equity and building a more inclusive team environment, codifying values and agreements is a critical first step. Values and agreements can serve as accountability mechanisms for a team, providing language to support active engagement around issues of equity and inclusion and creating expectations for how team members will discuss sensitive issues around identity. Putting these ideas onto paper will also help sustain the culture of equity and inclusion in your case review meetings as they can become a pivotal component of how you orient new members to your MDT.

We recommend teams engage in an internal process to develop these values and agreements as the language should be owned by the MDT itself. However, the following are good examples of MDT values and agreements that will help ensure that equity and inclusion are at the heart of your case review.

Example values

- We believe that children and families deserve systems that actively work to mitigate bias and that can be responsive to individual and community needs.
- We honor the diversity of lived experiences on our MDT and actively seek cross-cultural understanding that improves the work we do for children and families.

- We value making mistakes and understand that our greatest learning experiences will come from being brave, saying the wrong thing, accepting feedback, and improving accordingly.
- Children and families are in the best position to tell us what they need. We prioritize listening to them, and we invest in tools that help us do so.

Example agreements

- We agree to be proactive in identifying inequities in our community's systems response to child maltreatment. It is the job of all members of the MDT to speak up.
- Cultural considerations will be discussed in all cases reviewed by the MDT.
- We will discuss problematic language, insinuations, and behaviors live in the room when we see or hear them. We will balance the safety of fellow team members when doing so.
- We agree to ask questions about our own cultural blind spots, and we agree to seek our own education while also actively participating in team learning opportunities.

Engaging in a process to develop values pertaining to equity and inclusion is also a good opportunity to revisit your current team agreements to determine if any of them might be causing detrimental power imbalances unintentionally or if any of them could be strengthened to improve your overall team function.

Actively Creating an Inclusive Case Review

Creating a strong sense of inclusion in the case review setting is particularly important to improving systems equity and the cultural responsiveness of services. Inclusive case review meetings will help cultivate and retain diverse talent in the child maltreatment field, leading to more adaptive services and referrals. Inclusive case reviews will also lead to more courageous challenges to policies, practices, and behaviors, creating greater opportunities for quality improvement. The following is a set of strategies for CAC leaders, MDT facilitators, and MDT members to consider employing in the case review setting to be proactive in cultivating more inclusive environments.

Key strategies

- **Challenging problematic/bigoted behaviors, statements, and insinuations**

Facilitators and MDT members might often find themselves in the position of needing to intervene when someone attending case review says or suggests something that is either overtly or could be construed as problematic. It is critical to follow up in these moments so that other members of the MDT still understand that their identities and perspectives are appreciated and that they can still be exactly who they are during meetings. There are a number of options for team members when it comes to intervening:

- **Ask clarifying questions:** Examples include: Can you tell me more about that comment? Can you provide me some more context for why you said that? Is that exactly what you meant to say?
- **Directly confront:** Provide a basis for why you want to take the opportunity to correct a behavior or a comment. Share details about why it is important to you, and then provide options for a different way to go about the situation.
- **Deflect, distract, follow up:** In situations where you assess that it might not be safe to directly confront a problematic behavior or comment in the moment or if you think the confrontation might be counterproductive to your goal of inclusion, you might need to redirect the conversation or deflect the issue temporarily. It is important to follow up with the individual involved shortly after using the first two techniques. It is just as critical to check in on other members of the team who might have been negatively affected by the comment or behavior in question to identify any needs or additional opportunities for improvement.

- **Providing access to training and peer networking opportunities**

Make sure that consistent opportunities for training on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are being offered to MDT partners, and utilize the MDT's agreements to ensure accountability to participate. Also consider fostering opportunities for peer connection among MDT partners to discuss important research articles, news, and local events that will help create a richer common understanding of the diversity of lived experience among the team and in the community it serves.

Note that the delivery of training around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion can be part of completing the ongoing training requirements in the NCA Standards in the areas of diversity, equity and inclusion (minimum of 8 hours every two years for CAC staff), ongoing training requirements for additional MDT professionals, and the facilitation or provision of relevant training information to the MDT required in Essential Component I of the Multidisciplinary Team Standard.⁴

- **Structuring in feedback opportunities**

Providing opportunities for the MDT to give feedback on your case review is good practice. In any formal surveys done, questions that assess the degree of inclusion felt by MDT partners should be asked routinely. Additionally, providing opportunities for open-text responses that allow partners to provide context and details for their feelings is important. Asking questions that allow MDT partners to weigh in on access and service issues should also be considered. Sample questions include:

- What concerns do you have about how children and families access the services provided at the CAC or by MDT partners?
- Where do you see opportunities to increase the cultural responsiveness of services?

- To what degree do you feel a sense of inclusion during case review and MDT meetings?
- What changes would you like to see in how our MDT talks about issues of identity, equity, and inclusion during case review?

- **Building in opportunities to review client data and feedback**

Case review meetings should regularly include dedicated time to review up-to-date community assessment reports contextualized with client data from the CAC. Any time there is client feedback provided regarding the degree they felt included, respected, and seen as they moved through the systems response to child maltreatment, it should be reviewed at the earliest opportunity in the case review setting. This feedback should actively be sought using available client satisfaction tools such as the Outcome Measurement System (OMS) through NCA.

Developing a Dedicated Equity Case Review

For CACs and MDTs who are ready to take a deep dive into the systems and structures in which they work to determine whether or not their services are both accessible and culturally relevant, developing a specific equity case review is a good option. The process described below allows for any member of an MDT or CAC to identify a case where it appears that a child or family's identity affected the manner in which they moved through the systems response to child maltreatment. Then the MDT can come together to look at all of the points at which an instance of bias, lack of intercultural development, or a systems inequity might have led to a negative experience. Subsequently, the MDT will come to agreement on changes to policy and practice that might be needed or where additional training and partnership might help improve the quality and responsiveness of services.

Identifying cases

All members of the MDT participating in case review should be empowered to identify cases where they feel an issue of systems inequity or bias were evident. Reasons why a case could be identified include:

- One of the critical referring entities does not open a case due to a perceived bias towards the child or family involved.
- Referrals for mental health or medical services are either not made due to a perceived bias, or they are made to providers not capable of implementing specialized, culturally relevant responses.
- Inappropriate, racist, bigoted, homophobic commentary is made during any of the case touch-points, including the primary case review itself.
- A general lack of cultural understanding exists around the child or family's identity among the MDT.

- Direct feedback is received from a child or family that they felt their identity affected how they were treated or how they experienced services.

After cases are identified, they should be sent to the MDT facilitator or whoever is generally in charge of scheduling case review meetings.

Scheduling an equity case review

In general, a specific equity case review should be scheduled non-urgently to ensure maximum participation. The goal of this process will typically be long-term growth and program improvement rather than managing an acute issue with a case. Scheduling them on an ad hoc basis when a case is identified makes sense. Or, if having set dates on the calendar is important for the MDT in question, the review can either be canceled when there are no cases that have been identified or the MDT can use the time for peer networking and learning opportunities around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Components of an equity case review

- **Case overview**

An identified facilitator will provide the overarching details of the case being discussed, including the concerns brought to the table pertaining to identity or systems equity. If the MDT member who identified the case is willing to provide additional details as to why they wanted to do a deeper dive, this can occur here. However, the lead facilitator should confirm with the MDT member if they are comfortable doing so or being identified as the individual who brought the case forward.

- **Questions and group discussion**

The group can engage in unstructured conversation and ask each other questions about the nature of the case to gain a better understanding of how decisions were made.

- **Cultural interpretation/community education opportunity**

When possible and appropriate, the MDT can request the participation of key community partners representing cultural groups or affiliations to provide important context and education regarding how this case went. Experts from the local community with critical cultural understanding can provide greater insight as to why a family might have engaged with the process in a specific way or on the community's beliefs and attitudes about child maltreatment. They can also provide suggestions for culturally responsive engagement with the communities in question moving forward.

Note that inviting outside participants into case review will require the same confidentiality agreements as are used for regular case review. It will also not always be possible to bring in members of the community to provide education when balancing the safety and anonymity of CAC clients. Often, the communities involved are very small and closely connected interpersonally. The CAC and MDT will also want

to prepare individuals coming into the case review environment for the potential of secondary traumatic stress or triggers when discussing issues of child maltreatment.

- **Agreements and next steps**

The MDT can then build consensus on areas for improvement in either systems or practices based on the dynamics of the case and the additional cultural education provided. The MDT should leave the equity case review with clear next steps in the following areas:

- **Policy/Protocol adjustments:** What interagency agreements and protocols might need to be revisited and revised in order to make sure that children and families from non-dominant cultures are getting where they need to be for the investigation and intervention? Are there clear policy reasons why children from certain backgrounds are more likely to get to the CAC and receive follow-up services? Are there additional decision-makers who need to weigh in?
- **Practice changes:** Are there new treatment modalities that should be considered for the CAC and MDT? Are there additional information collection opportunities that can be built into your pre-forensic interview advocacy? Are there forms that need to be adjusted? Are there more culturally relevant ways to ask questions and offer resources?
- **Training and education:** What additional training or knowledge must be accessed by the MDT to make sure that there are better outcomes for children and families in the future? How will we hold each other accountable?
- **Partnerships:** What community partnerships do we need to collectively prioritize to make sure our services are as accessible and adaptable as possible?

Conclusion

Case review is an exceptional opportunity to address the systems and structures that often disadvantage children and families from non-dominant cultures while also identifying new opportunities to be more culturally and individually responsive. Depending on an MDT's readiness and capacity to have conversations about intersectional identity factors that might affect how children and families move through the systems response to child abuse, a CAC and MDT can choose to implement any or all of the above options for centering the concept of equity in the case review setting. Those leading this initiative on an MDT should know that it is often important to take small steps in this work to make sure all partners can engage effectively to improve their intercultural competence while still ensuring that the rich diversity of lived experience held by the children and families being served remains at the center of MDT function. However, the risk that comes with boldly challenging MDT partners in the case review setting must always be weighed with the risk of not challenging them. This framework is designed to be a tool to support both courageous and smart action for the children and families who deserve to be seen, respected, and honored for exactly who they are.

Additional Resources

[Recognizing Bias and Fostering Healthy Communication](#) - **Midwest Regional CAC**

This training is designed to help professionals develop awareness of their own biases and learn strategies to challenge those biases in themselves and others through healthy communication.

[Intercultural Development Inventory](#) - **IDI, LLC**

This is a widely used tool to assess cross-cultural competence and can be helpful for an MDT and CAC to facilitate conversations about intercultural development.

[Shared Equity Leadership: Making Equity Everyone's Work](#) - **American Council on Education**

This resource will provide ideas for how to gain buy-in from every member of the MDT pertaining to leading change around issues of equity.

[General Case Review Resources](#) - **Northeast Regional CAC**

An important set of foundational and quality improvement resources around developing case review.

For additional questions, please reach out to Corey Brodsky, Program Manager for Chapter Development and Partnerships at MRCAC at corey.brodsky@childrensmn.org

References

¹ National Children's Alliance. (2022). *National Standards of Accreditation for Children's Advocacy Centers, 2023 ed.* <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2023-RedBook-v5B-t-Final-Web.pdf>

² 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/pubs/issue-briefs/racialdisproportionality/>

³ Smith, B. D., Kay, E. S., & Pressley, T. D. (2018). Child maltreatment in rural southern counties: Another perspective on race, poverty and child welfare. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 80*, 52-61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.03.012>

⁴ National Children's Alliance. (2022). *Putting Standards into Practice, 2023 ed.* https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2023-PSIP-BlueBook_v5_web.pdf

This project is made possible through Grant #15PJDP-22-GK-03060-JJVO, awarded by the Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.