LoopBack podcast: Episode 1

CATE DYMIT (00:04):
Hello everyone. And welcome to the LoopBack podcast

NARRATOR (00:06):
Loop back loop back loop back, back, back

CATE DYMIT (00:09):
We're so happy you are listening in on the Minnesota Department of Human Services first community engagement podcast series. This podcast serves as a space for listening and engaging in dialogue on topics of community interest. The LoopBack is also a tool for uplifting community voices to inform the Department of Human Services or DHS on how we can better serve the people of Minnesota. Throughout the series we will chat with DHS staff and partners on how they're engaging with people in your community and addressing ongoing topics of discussion raised by community members like you. I'm your host Cate Dymit from the Community Relations team here at DHS. Let's get into today's episode.

CATE DYMIT (00:54):
We're starting off the series by discussing what outreach and engagement work at DHS looks like and how community members like you fit into the process. We'll dig deeper into this process with our senior leadership and wrap up with ways you can get involved and stay connected with us in our engagement efforts. To provide a little context for our listeners, the Minnesota Department of Human Services is Minnesota's largest state agency and provides services for over a million Minnesotans in 87 counties and 11 tribal nations. As part of DHS, the Community Relations team works to build relationships and trust through engaging with communities in Minnesota.

CATE DYMIT (01:38):
In our pilot episode, we introduced one type of engagement experience the team hosts, which are called Community Empowerment Sessions. These sessions are designed to uplift community voices and facilitate the process of co-creating solutions in partnership with the people DHS serves. The topics covered have been identified as areas of interest by folks who've attended previous sessions and through social media engagement. During the Community Empowerment Sessions, you can come share your thoughts, questions, and experiences related to the topics discussed. DHS leadership and staff are gathered in the same space with community members to have important conversations that can better inform DHS policies and programs. If you haven't listened to the pilot episode yet, I definitely recommend checking it out as it covers the background and purpose of these sessions.

CATE DYMIT (02:35):
We held the first Community Empowerment Session virtually on December 1st in 2021, which centered on the legislative budget and how it impacts our communities. DHS legislative staff and DHS equity directors, who lead equity initiatives at the agency, shared information on the legislative budget with community members from across Minnesota. Session attendees were able to participate in small group breakout rooms for a deeper discussion and each discussion room was facilitated by a DHS staff person representing different areas of the agency, including Healthcare, Children and Family Services, Direct Care and Treatment, Community Supports, Continuing Care for Older Adults, and DHS Operations. We learned a lot from the first session on topics and issues important to our communities, and we'll be covering it all in the next LoopBack episodes, so make sure you're listening in. On June 15th, we will be coming back to host the virtual loop back session where we will share updates on decisions, plans, or changes that were made as a result of community's input. If you're interested in learning more about the Community Empowerment Sessions, check out the outreach and engagement page of the Department of Human Services website, at mn.gov/DHS. You can find the page under the 'About DHS' section or by searching 'community relations.' On this page you can also sign up to receive updates by email. And in addition to the website, we will be communicating through our Facebook and Twitter accounts. So find and follow us at @MinnesotaDHS.

CATE DYMIT (04:12):
Community Empowerment Sessions are just one example of community outreach and engagement happening at DHS. To talk to us more about the work across the agency we are joined today by a very special guest, the commissioner of DHS Jodi Harpstead. Welcome Commissioner Harpstead and thank you so much for being here today to kick off the first episode of the LoopBack podcast.

COMMISSIONER JODI HARPSTEAD (04:41):
Well thank you for having me.

CATE DYMIT (04:43):
So we talk a lot about authentic community engagement on our team. And at DHS, we define authentic community engagement in our equity policy, as the process of co-creating solutions in partnership with people who through their own experiences, know the barriers to opportunity best. It is grounded in building relationships based on mutual respect and that acknowledge each person's added value to developing solutions. So what we're really talking about is the way in which we best build meaningful relationships and interact with the people we serve. So Commissioner Harpstead in your own words, would you mind telling us a little bit about what authentic community engagement means to you and why it's important at DHS?

COMMISSIONER JODI HARPSTEAD (05:27):
Well, I've said many times since I've been commissioner that if I don't reach out deliberately to listen to community, the people I tend to hear from are advocates and associations and folks with lots of resources to have the capacity to come in and talk to the Department of Human Services. And that's fine. I learn a lot from them, but we really want to listen to people who actually live in our communities, have the lived experience that we are interested in working with, and we want to talk to people who use our services and can tell us what it's like to experience that and who can tell us what it is they need to live fuller lives in community. So we're eager to spend more of our time as we go forward, really talking to the folks who live in our communities and interact with the department's services.

CATE DYMIT (06:20):
And one way we like to think about authentic community engagement is that it's a process and it's a process that takes time to build and implement in our work. And so I know there's folks across the agency who are working hard to improve the ways in which DHS is engaging with communities in Minnesota, an engagement that will result in positive changes to our programs and policies. So to give us a better idea of what building this process looks like, what would you say is important for DHS to do when engaging with the people we serve?

**COMMISSIONER JODI HARPSTEAD (06:54):**
Yeah, well, it's certainly important to help DHS produce programs and services that best address the needs of the people that use them. And we want to honor people's lived experience, because only people literally experiencing our services know the barriers to accessing them and the programs that would work best for their lives. And even to tell us what services we should be offering in the first place. So we're working to do as much of that as we can. I just wanted to double down on your comment that it's a process that takes time. We've been talking since I became commissioner about being trustworthy to the people of Minnesota, and you can't just say that we're going to be talking to community and have a, you know, flip a switch. People have to experience that and feel like they're really being heard and that they're being part of the process and watch our services change as a result of their input before they really trust that what we're doing is authentic community engagement. So I just wanted to repeat that.

**CATE DYMIT (07:54):**
Yes, building trust we definitely see as a principle of authentic community engagement. And part of building trust too that we think about and talk about on our team is looping back. After we've connected with folks and had community engagement events, it's always important to loop back and follow up with how community input and feedback is informing the work we do. And so part of looping back is this podcast, as it is called the LoopBack podcast and creating a space to continue having conversations based on community's topics of interests and engagement. So we've talked about the importance of community engagement and what that looks like in theory. So Commissioner Harpstead could you share with us any examples that highlight authentic community engagement in practice at DHS?

**COMMISSIONER JODI HARPSTEAD (08:48):**
Yeah. So for example, in May of 2018, the DHS Case Management Redesign team began scheduling community events throughout Minnesota to provide a space where participants could really openly share their experiences. They provided food and gift cards for attendees, partnered with local organizations to coordinate and structure conversations. We heard inputs from more than 300 people at these events and their stories and feedback are being incorporated into redesigning our case management system. So that was a really early example.

**COMMISSIONER JODI HARPSTEAD (09:22):**
We also are excited about our trauma response mini grants. Our Behavioral Health Division engaged with community partners during the pandemic to provide funding for mental health and substance use disorder prevention and treatment. And out of that came trauma response mini grants that could be quickly rolled out to respond to the needs of the African American community in a fairly unprecedented approach to get funding out as quickly as possible and make a difference during the pandemic. And so the team secured $630,000 in combined block grant funding to provide mental health and substance use disorder services in that process. And then I'm very proud of the work of our American Indian Food Security Workgroup during COVID. We actually gave them a Circle of Excellence Award for their work in coming up with culturally responsive food that was provided to American Indian elders from the food security work group during the pandemic. And it was just a total process of engaging with community, understanding what was needed, listening to what they really...
needed, and then responding with those specific requirements. And it was just a beautiful effort with a great outcome that really delighted everyone involved.

CATE DYMIT (10:40):
Well, thank you so much Commissioner for providing those examples. I think that it's great to hear what kind of work is going on at DHS to authentically engage with the people we serve and best address their needs.

CATE DYMIT (10:54):
Now, the coronavirus pandemic has significantly impacted the needs of the people DHS serves. Now more than ever, community engagement is essential to understanding the critical needs of community, as well as how DHS can address and support those needs. The pandemic has also forced us to re-envision how we interact and engage with the individuals and communities we serve. When we could not be physically in community with folks, virtual forms of engagement, such as hosting virtual town halls and utilizing different social media platforms have created opportunities that overcome geographical barriers to former forms of engagement. So Commissioner Harpstead would you mind talking to us about what opportunities you see for greater outreach and community engagement at DHS?

COMMISSIONER JODI HARPSTEAD (11:47):
Yeah. One of the areas we're really eager to work on is our Modernization plan. It's a plan to make sure that human service systems, partners and community who are experiencing the most disparities are included to build an inclusive and accessible human service delivery system. Some people have already experienced our MN benefits website where people can come in and sign up for nine different services in a few minutes, which used to take hours in our county offices. And we're continuing that work to make access to our services, easier, simpler, and really user friendly as we go through the work. And so we've been, we have a whole strategic plan we're working on with an outside consulting firm and we keep it layering on additional approaches to making it easier and easier to access our services.

COMMISSIONER JODI HARPSTEAD (12:44):
We're also training our staff to be prepared to host and listen to community input. Our Community Relations team of which you are a part, has shared a community engagement guide and plan to help DHS staff and authentically engage and think about new ways to really reach out to community and listen, and to be sure that we're listening to the people we serve and including them in decision making tables. So we're going to do more and more of that until all of the parts of DHS are doing authentic community engagement. Another piece we have coming right up is we were so proud last year when the legislature passed an opportunity for grants for culturally specific and rural providers. And we're starting that process now with a quick call for proposals, that's going out to invite community-based organizations to lead some targeted engagements that will inform how those grants and how that spending is actually done. And after we finish that short process, then we'll make those community grants for capacity building available out in the world and make sure that we use all kinds of forms of communication and outlets to be sure that people know that they're available. So I'm very excited about that process. And not only are we making those grants available, but we're helping having community help us design how to get the grants out there.

CATE DYMIT (14:12):
Well, it sounds like there's a lot of very exciting things going on and things to look forward to with community engagement outreach at DHS. And hopefully we'll be able to cover some of that here on the LoopBack podcast.
Now, for our final question today, I would love to ask you Commissioner Harpstead, what are you hopeful for looking forward? And what is your vision for the future of outreach and community engagement at DHS?

COMMISSIONER JODI HARPSTEAD (14:39):
Well, really mainly more and more and more examples of the things that we've mentioned today. We're just getting started and I'm eager for the Community Relations department to help us spread the news throughout DHS of these beautiful examples of authentic community engagement and ask folks in DHS to do more and more of it. We just want to continue to open up conduits of conversation, places where we can be with community and listen, and then take specific things that we're thinking of implementing and going out and finding out how and where and who we need to be with to get it done right. But probably even more importantly than figuring out how to implement things we are planning to do, we simply need to go out and say, what do you need? What should we do next? What should we do next year? What should be in the bills that we propose to the governor for inclusion in his budgets going forward so that we're really starting way back at the beginning and asking community what they need most from us. So eager to just keep practicing and getting better at this and trying things and trying things and spreading the word across the agency about good examples so that everyone starts experimenting and trying things and sharing their ideas, and we just get better and better at it over the years.

CATE DYMIT (16:05):
Well, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and insights with us Commissioner Harpstead. I really appreciate you taking the time to be on this podcast and kicking off the series. So thank you.

COMMISSIONER JODI HARPSTEAD (16:15):
Thank you. And thank you for doing the podcast, another great opportunity to connect with community.

CATE DYMIT (16:27):
Well folks that wraps up the first episode of the LoopBack podcast. Stay tuned for episode two, which will feature a response from the first Community Empowerment Session on the legislative budget and what it means for you and your community. One final announcement to share is we will be hosting the next Community Empowerment Session virtually on May 11th. This session will focus on community healing and include discussions around how DHS behavioral health services can be more responsive to communities and reflect people's cultures, languages, and experiences. More information about the session can be found on the DHS website as well as on our Facebook page and Twitter.

CATE DYMIT (17:11):
Thank you all for joining us on this episode. The LoopBack podcast is a production of the state of Minnesota Department of Human Services. Episodes and transcripts can be found on our website at mn.gov/DHS/loopback. In addition to our featured guests, we would love to hear from you. Send us your ideas for the podcast, as well as topics you'd like to discuss in future Community Empowerment Sessions to our email posted online. You can also share your suggestions on Twitter or Facebook to @MinnesotaDHS, with the hashtag #DHSLoopBack and #DHSCommunityEmpowerment. This is Cate Dymit with the LoopBack podcast until next time.

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