LoopBack podcast: Episode 2

CATE DYMIT (00:03):
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 (00:58):
On the evening of December 1st back in 2021, DHS hosted the first virtual Community Empowerment Session where over 50 people gathered to discuss the legislative budget and how it impacts communities. At the beginning of the session, DHS legislative directors went over the historic outcomes of the 2021 legislative session that related to DHS, including overall budget amounts and a breakdown of legislation affecting programs and services in health care, children and family services, community supports and direct care and treatment. If you weren't able to attend the session, there's a legislative fact sheet included in the episode notes on our website, as well as the PowerPoint shared that has additional information on the content covered. Later in the session, folks had the option to join different small group breakout rooms and discuss more specific topics related to DHS programs and services. Following the session, we sent out a survey to collect feedback, as well as hear from participants on how they ranked their interest in attending a future Community Empowerment Session on various topics that surfaced during the breakout room discussions. These topics included creating culturally responsive services, defining and addressing health disparities, coping with ongoing crisis and trauma, lack of access to stable and affordable housing, improving access and independence in DHS services and programs, state child care licensing, addressing disparities in the child foster care system and mental health services. After the survey was sent out all the feedback collected during the session and the survey results were compiled into a report that was shared with all DHS staff who participated and with the administrative leaders. We then began meeting with different folks across the agency to discuss how we could be responsive to the questions and input we received. The 2022 legislative session started shortly after in January. So while the legislative session was underway, folks at the agency worked to compile resources and information that were
responsive to the questions and topics brought up during the Community Empowerment Session. These topics range broadly across different areas in the agency and required collaborative efforts within DHS to compile helpful responses. These responses were then uploaded to the outreach and engagement webpage. And now we're here on the LoopBack podcast, continuing to discuss the legislative process and how community members can get involved.

CATE DYMIT (03:40):
Now that we've gone through a quick rundown of the first Community Empowerment Session and some of the behind the scenes following the session, I'm excited to welcome two special guests who were both in attendance and have great insight on engaging with the DHS legislative process. Joining me is the chair of the DHS Cultural and Ethnic Communities Leadership Council, Foua Choua Khang, which means weather in Hmong, and the DHS Director of Legislative Relations. Matt Burdick. Welcome Matt and Foua Choua. Thank you so much for being here.

FOUA CHOUA KHANG (04:14):
Hi thanks for having me.

MATT BURDICK (04:15):
Thanks for having us.

CATE DYMIT (04:17):
All right. So both of you were at the first Community Empowerment Session, which focused on the legislative budget and its impacts. So kind of to start off, could I hear a little bit about what stood out to you during this session and were there any kind of conversations or topics that were brought up that really interested you?

FOUA CHOUA KHANG (04:37):
Yeah. What stood out for me was the numbers were large, as I am a civilian, a constituent, but it made a lot of sense how the folks who presented laid it out and what was spent and where I think as a board member of many boards, I usually have a question about like deficits and where are we projecting. And I think that was, that was one thing that I kind of took offline with a couple of key leaders just to really think about sustainability for the Department of Human Services as an enterprise. And so what stood out were the numbers, but it was the people who really understood the numbers and presented it in a way where it was digestible by lay folks like me.

MATT BURDICK (05:27):
Yeah. And I you know, one of the things that really struck me was how much interest we had in this session. I just, the legislative process is such an arcane can be such an opaque way of operating. And it was just really heartening to see so much interest in understanding what might be happening at the legislative session. And also how much intersection there was between the ideas that we were discussing that were part of what was being proposed in the budget and what some of the just on the ground needs we were hearing from folks in the different breakout sessions. And so that was really encouraging that we're at least in some spaces getting towards where the need actually is. And it's not just sort of the bureaucracy being in the ivory tower, thinking about this is what folks want, but there's actually that intersection between, this is what I'm experiencing by day to day. We're in such a unique space coming, still dealing with the pandemic and all the follow up from that. And just hearing kind of that the unity between what people are seeing as what we need to be doing in this time and what was being discussed during the session.
CATE DYMIT (06:30):
Yeah. Yes. And the, you know, the purpose of this session was one to inform folks of kind of what happened during the 2021 legislative session as it was a historical one for outcomes for health and human services. But also we really wanted to create a space where we could have open, authentic conversations and really hear from folks on what was resignating and what was missing from the legislative outcomes and hear from communities on the topics and issues that are impacting them, that should be centered in legislative action moving forward. So having those open conversations and then capturing what was said to center that in our work moving forward, I think was really important purpose for the session and what we were trying to accomplish there. So kind of stepping back overall, what would you say were some of the main takeaways that you had by the end of the session and kind of maybe how it’s been taken back to influence and inform your work that you’re doing now?

MATT BURDICK (07:31):
Yeah, I think for me, it’s about, we need to do more of this and do this more often through our process. That this was really helpful to just kind of have that dialogue early and often in the conversation that we’re having internally. And I want to figure out ways that we can build that in ongoing, as we look ahead. The legislative processes as we’ll talk about is such a rote process, but that doesn’t mean that conversation needs to follow that linear timeline. And that was something that really struck me is that even though we were talking about things that had passed in the previous session, and we were at a point where there wasn’t really time to modify what we were doing for the upcoming session, it didn’t mean that this wasn’t influencing what we prioritized in the upcoming session or planting seeds for a future legislative session, or how do we partner with community for ideas that they might bring forward. And so, for me, it just was getting out of the rut of the cycle that we always think about this process. And then just think about it in a more organic way that can be driven by a more ongoing conversation.

CATE DYMIT (08:35):
Foua Choua did you have any main takeaways following the session that really stuck with you?

FOUA CHOUA KHANG (08:41):
I’m thinking, we’re talking about the legislative session here that just wrapped up. I was part of a couple of policy and a couple of conversations in community about getting letters of support and moving things forward. And I think those who know know, and so back at ya, Matt, like I’d love to be part of those conversations earlier and really doing like a session 1 0 1, for folks who are brand new, interested, and really leaving out like the nitty gritty details of like, you gotta go talk to this person, this person, but really laying out the process high level. This is what we need to do. This is what we anticipate we’ll do. And this is what we’re thinking that would happen after everything, if everything aligns. And so, I’ve been part of multiple different groups of folks and stakeholders contributing to different legislative sessions in the past. And what I’ve learned so far is the more you collaborate with the people who are impacted by the policies that are being passed or the budgets that are being passed, the more you have a chance of getting things through the legislative process and so really integrating community voices. And I, as a community health worker, we really get the stories from the, from the boots on the ground into the hands of our policy makers, our lobbyists, our stakeholders that are going to legislation. So thank you for that, Matt, cause I am looking forward to being part of future conversations definitely.

CATE DYMIT (10:13):
And I heard both of you kind of mention and hint at how just complex the legislative process can be. And so recognizing that, but also maybe taking a look a little more with Matt having you here, if you could maybe give us kind of an overview of what the DHS legislative process kind of looks like in terms of how DHS interacts with the state legislature to kind of push forward their proposals and policies, I think would be kind of great information to share with our listeners.

**MATT BURDICK (10:45):**
Yeah, absolutely. And you know, one of the things that we've been working on with some success, but obviously a lot of room for continued growth is as I said, sort of breaking this thinking of the cycle of the legislative process being linear. Really, I think the legislative process is a year round effort that begins with just listening that we're doing. And exactly what Foua Choua was talking about here of what are people on the ground bringing to us. And, you know, if I hear a problem once that could be an isolated incident, if I hear it three times, something's going on, I hear that 10 times there is a systemic issue at play here. And so collecting those and that's really happening at the, at the level, not really of folks like myself that are doing legislative work full-time, but really the people that are doing the programmatic work, connecting with people in community, providers, people accessing services, that's really the genesis of our legislative process and that can come at really any time in the year.

**MATT BURDICK (11:40):**
Our formal legislative process really begins almost as soon as the legislative session ends. And we really do start looking ahead towards the next year in June, July, just because of the complexity of human services and the amount of work it takes to come from that here's a problem to generating an idea and how would we operationalize that, it really is just massive undertaking that takes really 18 months to do well. So even by beginning in June for next session, we're behind the curve. And so that's where that kind of year round process kicks in. But really June and July bring forward our formalized process where we begin with usually a large list of ideas and then hone those down. And those are informed by priorities that we're hearing from our partners, from our leadership, obviously as a part of the executive branch, a lot of our work is driven by the governor. And so the Governor's Office will set out goals, themes that really form the umbrella under which that we're working. And that doesn't mean that that's exclusive, but that really does help us focus. And so this Governor's Office has really had a focus on children and families and so that's often a place where we put a lot of our time and energy. And then other themes are informed by what's happening in the world. I don't think anyone would've thought we'd be dealing with a global pandemic and that's obviously informing a lot of what we're doing in our work. And so really between June through mid-fall, we're doing a lot of honing, vetting, talking to people. What's great is earlier in the process, we have a lot more freedom to talk openly about what we're thinking, but further along we get into the process, especially for things that cost money, we're actually limited under state law in what we can share. And that's in part to protect the process from political influence, because if everything we were thinking of were completely out in the open, then different political sides would just take that and say, oh, here's what you're working on. Great. And so it's in order to protect sort of the ability to think creatively outside of the pressures that the political process breeds, but what that also damages is our ability to be transparent to get feedback. And so we come up with a lot of creative ways to say, not saying this is on our agenda, but you know, say this were to happen, what do you think about that? And so try to keep that line of dialogue open for as long as we possibly can.

**MATT BURDICK (14:02):**
So we get into the later part of the fall and into the winter, that's when the decision making actually leaves the agency and goes over to the Governor's Office who makes the final determinations of what we bring forward. And then that's usually released early on in the legislative session, January or February. And that really does dictate what the agency advocates for throughout the session. But one thing that I really stress in my role is just because we have an agenda that's set by the Governor's Office doesn't mean that we can't be useful and helpful in other things that people want to bring forward. And something that we call technical assistance, where as sort of the people that have to operationalize all these different ideas, we can really help people that have good ideas think through those mechanics, those details that might not be apparent if you're not the one actually, you know, putting into the computer system or thinking through all those pieces. But you really have an idea that you know is gonna impact people's lives, that's where we can be helpful as sort of a neutral arbiter of saying, okay, if you did it this way that would work, this way you might violate federal law. So how do we help shape ideas and make them practical so that the folks that are on the ground advocating for them are set up for success. Cause the last thing we want to do is have a really great idea come forward, becomes law, and then we say, I'm sorry, we can't, we can't actually make that work cause here's the 10 things that you didn't think of. We wanna be proactive on the front end, helping people work through those problems before we get to the point of implementing it. So well our process is somewhat rigid, we do have a lot of flexibility to be supportive of other folks that don't have the constraints that we do working inside of government. And so that's something that we're trying to figure out. And I think in partnership with the CECLC will be a really great space to do that, of how can we help incubate ideas that are not generated from within our own walls, but that we share the values and goals of.

CATE DYMIT (15:50):
Yeah. Thank you, Matt, for sharing that. I think that was really helpful information in kind of walking through all of that and talking about the technical assistance is really cool to hear.

CATE DYMIT (16:00):
So Foua Choua, from both your professional perspective in your roles and your perspective as a representative from your communities, could you maybe speak to what your experiences have been like engaging with both the DHS legislative process through the CECLC, but also maybe the state legislature more broadly if you have anything that stands out.

FOUA CHOUA KHANG (16:25):
Yeah, so my communities I identify with is a refugee immigrant and I am Hmong, first generation here, first generation running for office, First generation for a lot of things. Just a quick plug before I answer that question, MORE Empowerment services has a 5k walk at Lake Phalen, June 11th, please meet me there, 9:30 AM. So to answer that, from a professional experience in my involvement with the CECLC and with the DHS legislative process, it has been a journey. My term with the CECLC is two years, and to Matt's point earlier about 18 month process, I got right into it in August. And so things, the agenda for 2019, the agenda was already set, right when I got into CECLC as a member learning the ropes of why was that set and how. And so for community, we wanna know the why, why is it important? How did you get here? What's important and who was involved? And so sometimes that process could be really hard for us to follow because it's been chosen and decided, but it's not too late because the next agenda will be set again. And so really learning through that process and thinking about how do I support DHS and how does DHS support the communities that we all serve on the CECLC, into the next session. And so it's all is not lost when I came in 2019, August of 2019, because session was already decided, the agenda was already decided and session was starting January, right, of 2020. So I learned through
this process that things take time and it takes 18 months, but you've got 18 months to really hone down in partnership with the entity, with the enterprise of DHS, to rethink through what you need, if it's budget constraints, what are those numbers? And who's responsible for that? And where is it coming from? And what are the responsibilities tied to policy or budget or anything that you would like to get to legislation? So really learning the ropes of that really helped me chair the CECLC and identifying the next agenda along with the leaders who are co-leading these work groups. So I'm not setting the agenda, but it's a collective of the community setting the agenda to push and to partner with DHS.

FOUA CHOUA KHANG (18:55):
One of the things that we finally got pass and it took like 18 months was revision to the CECLC bylaws in terms of electing a co-director or co-chair I meant. And so we didn't have co-chairs to begin with, we are an entity about seven years old. And so right now we have legislation passed that we can elect a co-chair. And so in this next election for the CECLC chairs, we would have two people coming up for, um, for that position. And so that's really exciting because in community it's not very, it's hierarchical, but it's also linear in that sense or horizontal in that sense where power is shared and it's not reporting to one person, is a consensus approach. And so learning about the legislative process and then embedding some of our cultural understanding and wisdom into some of that legislation work really expanded how we reach out in community and how we gather stories to tell our stories and what we want to see happen with DHS.

CATE DYMIT (20:01):
Yeah. Thank you for bringing in the CECLC Foua Choua, cause I heard a lot about, you know, the work that that council has done with the legislative team at DHS, not just with the bylaws and the legislature that is structuring the council, but also within those work groups. I know there's the topic and issues work group that has topics that they're focusing on as well as a legislative and external policy work group that works closely with the DHS legislative team. So I'm kind of thinking about the council and how that's a space that DHS is interacting with community related to legislation, more broadly maybe could we talk a little bit about what, and we could pull from the CECLC but also I would love to hear both your perspectives on what it looks like to create an inclusive supportive space for engaging community members in the legislative process. Like what does that look like and what are thoughts that come to mind when we think about how we can improve the ways that we're engaging with community on this?

FOUA CHOUA KHANG (21:07):
I think transparency for lack of better word, because there's only so much you can share, but a really high level process of how feedback is taken or how wisdom is taken in and how it changes, it impacts the idea or the problem statement. And then what do you do with that afterwards? And then what are the next steps, right? What are the opportunities? And so my values are transparency, accountability, and opportunities, right? So how do you do that with community? And so when I convene spaces in community, first off, their stories is theirs to own and their truth is theirs to own. And so I can't battle them on their truth and make space for that because we are storytellers. As human beings, we are storytellers even through data or even through qualitative measures. And so make space and time for that. The bulk of your conversation should be hearing from your constituents, your members, your participants. And then secondly, that again transparent process, high level, it doesn't have to be detail. You don't have to tell the world that you are not going to do everything that they tell you to do, but you have to be mindful about the questions that you ask. And then thirdly, really follow up and follow through. If you're not going to do something with their feedback, say that, say, Hey, it was a great conversation, but we are moving in a different direction or we're pivoting, or we did something with that
conversation, right. Because what communities don’t want to see happen is the extraction process of, for instance, if you get your wisdom tooth extracted, you kind of wanna see what it looks like. I think everybody, most people kind of wanna see what their tooth looks like. And it could feel like that. It could feel like that was kind of painful and then I didn't see the product of it or the result of it. So really try to minimize that extraction process and be a little bit more inclusive about what's happening with the, the information with the data that's been gathered. So I hope that answers like the question around like making space and convening spaces with community. I don't speak for all communities, but what I found has worked is those three things, building trust, making space to hear stories, being transparent about your process and what you're going to do with that data and then follow up and follow through on what you're going to do next after you're done having that conversation or that space that was convened.

**MATT BURDICK (23:43):**
Yeah. I don't think I have much I can add to that cause that's exactly how I feel. I think, you know, the things that we have to improve on are engaging earlier, more often and following through with that feedback loop. And I think that's always a challenge that we need to just be intentional about overcoming is that you get overwhelmed and you get busy and things move really quickly in a really aggressive timeline in a way that doesn't really take into account that need to have that continuous, meaningful feedback loop and what it's incumbent on us just to take that pause and build time in the process to do that. What also I've found is, as I mentioned earlier, kind of, separating the legislative process in the traditional sense and the process of engagement. Some of the things that I feel have actually generated the most engagement on our side and a really passion around, are projects that were born out of multiple yearlong engagement efforts. One was around the roots and intersectionality of deep poverty and health. And the other was, kind of, the historical challenges faced by American-born Black Minnesotans in the Medicaid program. And both of those were products and projects that came about through community conversation, completely outside the legislative process, but then ended up informing the legislative process into what were kind of banner items that we have been fighting for, kind of above a lot of other priorities within the budget process. And I think it's because of all the work that went behind that, that by the time it got to the legislative process, the work had already really been done. And what we were just taking is the outcome of that and putting it into this new, this new process, which is legislative process as a means to fulfilling the commitments that were created from a much more organic, thoughtful, long term process, which always yields better outcomes than trying to, you know, take really difficult, meaningful conversations and compress them into a kind of an arbitrary timeframe the legislative process sets out for us. And so I think that's the strategy that I hope that we can build upon, is that we've got those really meaningful conversations happening in the background. And then when the time is right, they come onto the legislative conveyor belt, if you will, cause that's really what the legislative process feels like. Some days it's a conveyor belt and there's not a lot of options to, you know, hit the stop button and pull things off and readjust. And so I think as much work as we can do on the front end, before it gets to this, and we're just a means to an end, will help mitigate just some of the unfortunate ways that the legislative process constrains dialogue and constrains real collaboration. Which I think we should also strive to fix that longer term but that's, that's something beyond even what, you know, agencies can do. That's a structure of how we set agendas and build power in our society.

**CATE DYMIT (26:38):**
Yes. Well, this has been such a great conversation. I'm so happy to have both of you on the podcast, but I also just wanna take the opportunity, Foua Choua with you here representing the CECLC. And we kind of talked about how that is a really great space to be working collaboratively with DHS in advocating for community's
needs. So could you speak a little bit more about the council and maybe share ways how folks could best engage with the work the council moves forward if they're interested?

FOUA CHOUA KHANG (27:11):
Yeah. Thank you for that. So the CECLC meets monthly. They follow open meeting rules and so anybody can then be invited or anybody can come. So we're not excluding anyone from here, from these meeting meetings, unless it's a closed meeting and we will be making that announcement. But most of the time there isn't a closed meeting. It's open meeting. So things that I would bring forward if I was a community member or a community-based organization, and you're feeling a little bit stuck, not knowing where to go, I tell you we've got the best team supporting us from Community Relations at the Department of Human Services and they know who to connect you with. And so if you're feeling stuck about accessing child welfare or any other areas within DHS, I welcome you to access CECLC. Our email will be provided. Send us a good note, send us a note of any kind. And we will work with you to connect you with the right people or help process with you around the issues or the solutions that you wanna bring forward. And so, CECLC is a space for communities and not just leaders, but communities to come together to really think out and think about solutions that are best for us. And then to engage in that legislative process with folks like Matt earlier on. And so we're not waiting and waiting until an agenda is set. And what I heard from Matt today was that process is very organic if we are in the loop, telling them what we need, versus waiting for someone to reach out to us. And so I encourage you if you're feeling stuck, if you wanna process, if you need a thought leader, reach out to the CECLC via our email, and we're pretty good about emailing you back. And so we would be the connectors for you. And I think this is a good platform, the council is a good platform for you to show up and share your stories or to connect with so that we can help you make those internal connections for the follow up and follow through, for sure.

CATE DYMIT (29:16):
Yeah. Thank you Foua Choua. We'll make sure to include more information about the CECLC and their email contact information in the episode notes on our website. So you can make sure check it out there. But I think that wraps up kind of the end of our conversation. I wanna take a second again to thank you both so much for coming on and sharing your wisdom and your perspective and your insights. I think this was a great episode and I'm really looking forward to continuing to work with you two. And for a quick plug, we will be having our Loop Back Session to the December 1st Community Empowerment Session. So that will be happening on June 15th it's coming up here. So this will be a session to share any updates on the 2022 legislative session, as well as continue to discuss ways to best center community needs in policy and programming decisions at DHS, and of course in the legislative process. So hope you all can join us for that session. And once again, thank you so much, Matt Foua Choua, I appreciate it.

MATT BURDICK (30:20):
Thank you.

FOUA CHOUA KHANG (30:21):
Appreciate it.

CATE DYMIT (30:25):
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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