LoopBack podcast: Pilot Episode

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

NARRATOR (00:07):
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 (00:53):
Community Empowerment Sessions are a recent engagement effort the Community Relations team at DHS has been leading. In upcoming LoopBack episodes we will be following up on these sessions to further discuss the topics and questions that were brought up. For this pilot episode, we are taking a deeper look at how these sessions came to be and are joined by the former Director of Community Relations and the current Assistant Commissioner of Employee Culture De Anna Conover. Welcome De Anna.

DE ANNA CONOVER (01:22):
Thank you. Thank you very much, Cate.

CATE DYMIT (01:24):
Thanks for joining us today. So the Community Relations team has been working hard on preparing these new interactive and very exciting Community Empowerment Sessions. Can you tell us a little bit about the background on these sessions and what their purpose is?

DE ANNA CONOVER (01:40):
Certainly, certainly. Thank you so much for having me. It has been an honor and a privilege to work with the Community Relations team. Engagement is my heart, and that being said, that is where these sessions came from. I was having a conversation with our commissioner, Commissioner Harpstead, and she was thinking about
ways to connect with community more deeply and we had a discussion about listening sessions. One of the things I thought about was in light of our social climate, being in the middle of a pandemic, social justice issues looming all over our state and working virtually with over 8,000 people that are serving 1.7 million people, how could we connect in ways that were meaningful? And so I thought, what if we have a do something session and what would that look like. Now, initially, when we were thinking about this, we thought the pandemic was going to come to an end or at least we'd be able to be back in person. And so the original idea is what if we could leverage social media because most people have access to social media and ask communities, what do they want to talk to the Department of Human Services about. And then pull together those folks, that are considered subject matter experts in our department, pull our community partners together and communities together and have meaningful and authentic discussions because as you know, a big part of our team was to make sure that we were building trusting and authentic relationships with communities and being able to elevate the voices of communities in the work that we do. And I thought that might be a way to do it. Well, the pandemic not only continued, but it got a little worse and so we had to figure out how to do this virtually. So the idea came that if we use social media, we still could, could do this. And so hearing from communities, these are the things that are important to us, we gathered and we started. And so it wasn't to be just a listening session, but we wanted to do something about what we heard thus, the idea that we have discussed many times looping back. Another thing that happens with communities is we have the opportunity to come back and say this is what we did about what you told us, or this is how we can co-create together. And that also lends itself to that dialogue and the community building and the relationship building. So what we decided is whatever conversation we had with community, we would always commit to coming back at least six months later. You know, a year is to too long, you forgot what you talked about and less than six months, it's not enough to actually make some meaningful change. And so we thought if we came back six months, that would help us to continue the relationships as we co-created with communities together.

CATE DYMIT (04:59):
Wow, that sounds like really, really exciting engagement work. And I like that these sessions are really focused around what the community has indicated as topics and issues of interest. And this loop back feature sounds really interesting. So that's coming back within six months, did you say, to follow up on what we've heard from communities in the first session and what DHS has then done since then with their feedback.

DE ANNA CONOVER (05:26):
Absolutely. It was an opportunity to come back and, um, give that update, but to find out also is this meaningful? Is this working? Should we stop doing this? Should we do more of this? Should we do something completely different? And so that feedback is a part of co-creation not just being traditionally bureaucratic and coming and creating something and then presenting community with it and not just informing community this is what we'd like to do, but really having the opportunity to listen and then do together and work together.

CATE DYMIT (06:06):
Yeah, co-creation is definitely one of the main values behind this kind of authentic community engagement work, is what I'm hearing. And another thing to point out for our listeners is that this podcast series is also a feature of looping back on these sessions. So as I mentioned in the beginning, this podcast will be a space to continue the conversations and dialogues that we have at these Community Empowerment Sessions in a virtual space that can be shared across the state and for all of our listeners to hear virtually.
DE ANNA CONOVER (06:43):
Absolutely, absolutely. And I think one of the wonderful things about this podcast is being able to reach more people. One of the things we heard incidentally at one of the Community Empowerment Sessions was about out being responsive so much so that in my new role, I've taken that as one of our standards of the culture here is being responsive. But a community member mentioned to us during one of the sessions that they found the virtual meetings and some of the changes that we made to our services to be easier, and then to allow them to have more access to DHS and it created more accessibility to our services. And so I thought about that, you know, that is so important. So this podcast even being called the LoopBack is very intentional because it's about how we're coming back and how we're opening ourselves up, how we're being more accessible to communities.

CATE DYMIT (07:42):
Well, thank you so much for being here De Anna and giving us an inside scoop on these upcoming Community Empowerment Sessions. We'll share some more information towards the end of this podcast on how you can stay involved and join us for some upcoming community engagement or community empowerment sessions. So we hope to have you back on the podcast again in a future episode. Thank you so much for being here today.

DE ANNA CONOVER (08:05):
Thanks so much for your time. And thank you community.

CATE DYMIT (08:13):
The first Community Empowerment Session was held virtually on December 1st in 2021, which centered on the legislative of 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. We learned a lot from the first session on topics and issues important to our communities, and we'll be covering it all in future episodes. So make sure you listen in. We will be returning back on June 15th to host the virtual Loop Back Session in which we'll share updates on decisions, plans, or changes that were made as a result of the community's contributions. The next Community Empowerment Session is scheduled to be held on May 11th and will focus on culturally responsive behavioral health services. To see these dates again and for more information on the Community Empowerment Sessions, you can 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.' Here you can also sign up to receive updates by email. In addition, we will be communicating through our Facebook and Twitter accounts so find and follow us @MinnesotaDHS.

CATE DYMIT (09:33):
One last exciting announcement to share with you as we wrap up. The first full episode of the LoopBack podcast will be airing in May. We will be starting off the series talking about what authentic community engagement means at DHS and why it's important. This episode will feature an interview with special guest DHS commissioner Jodi Harpstead. So you won't wanna miss it.

CATE DYMIT (09:57):
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 like to discuss in future community empowerment sessions to our email posted online. You can also share your suggestions on Twitter or Facebook to @Minnesota DHS, with the hashtag #DHSloopback and hashtag #DHSCommunityEmpowerment. This is Cate Dymit with a loopback podcast until next time.

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