

Implementation Office Engagement Update: Phase I and II

The Implementation Office (IO) for the Department of Children, Youth, and Families was established at Minnesota Management and Budget on July 1, 2023, and charged with the implementation of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families through June 30, 2025. The IO has worked across impacted state agencies, including the Departments of Education (MDE), Health (MDH), Human Services (DHS), Public Safety (DPS), and Minnesota IT Services (MNIT), to transfer positions and programs to and establish the new agency. The launch of DCYF has also been informed by a robust internal and external engagement strategy, detailed in this update.

The work of the IO's engagement and equity staff has focused on engagement with families with young children and youth as well as intentional partnership with advisory boards and councils; Tribes and Tribal programs; county governments; practitioners; schools and education partners; labor partners; community-based organizations; advocates; and state leaders and employees.

The engagement strategy leverages the experience and relationships of contracted support holding county, Tribal, child care, and early education experience, as well as internal partners with relevant expertise – like the Children's Cabinet and program staff and directors from impacted agencies (DHS, MDE, DPS, MDH, MNIT) – and cross-agency convenings and structures.

IO engagement and equity staff have pursued a layered outreach strategy. Phase one of engagement began with:

- Creating open lines of communication with parents and caregivers, early care and education professionals, advocates, and community organizations represented on the state's advisory boards and councils and interagency convenings;
- Organizing site visits and listening sessions with families and advocates; and
- Attending statewide conferences with families, advocates, and professionals across the early care and education, youth services, child welfare, and foster care spectrum of services.

This strategic approach allowed for the IO engagement staff to both provide updates on DCYF, solicit input on the transition from state government convenings – like the 14 advisory boards and councils whose membership and scope most closely aligns with DCYF and the Children's Cabinet interagency teams – and work with community and local government to capture voices, lived experiences, and recommendations from those who both deliver and receive the programs transferring to DCYF. Engagement efforts were comprehensively tracked to understand when, where, how, and with whom conversations were taking place to inform and support DCYF's creation.

In the first five months of these activities, the engagement team organized and attended over 140 meetings and listening sessions with counties, school districts, community organizations, and impacted agencies, in the process connecting with more than 1,000 Minnesotans impacted by the creation of DCYF. Additionally, in 2023, DCYF was included as a topic in state agency consultations with the eleven Tribes that share geography with Minnesota, and the IO attended a number of these agency-led consultations.

The feedback, perspectives, and recommendations captured through these connections were summarized and extensively detailed in a [transition report](#) submitted to the legislature in March 2024 and were regularly incorporated into the IO's planning and considerations with state agencies, creating an ongoing feedback loop with Tribal, county, school, community, and family partners.

The second phase of engagement began in the spring of 2024. IO engagement staff aimed to coordinate with agency partners to build upon the first five months of outreach and bring even greater attention to the program areas complementing the early care and education and child welfare programs transferring to DCYF. This engagement was done with the goal of ensuring community partners understood the full breadth of "whole family" services coming together in DCYF and the opportunities that this new agency presents to improve program coordination, delivery, and ultimately families' outcomes. This outreach and engagement spotlighted transferring divisions and programs from DHS, MDE, and MDH, related to youth homelessness, food, and cash assistance programs; healthy child development and family wellbeing; out-of-school time and older youth; and youth justice, particularly where they intersect with DCYF's goals for improving program access, navigation, coordination, and delivery. This second phase of engagement also included greater outreach into multicultural communities and partnership with the state's ethnic councils to gather more insight from parents and advocates.

Between the two phases of engagement, more than 170 engagements have occurred with community members and advocates, tribes, counties, schools and employees from impacted agencies. This includes more than 60 Tribal consultations and meetings; 30 county meetings; and more than 85 engagements with parents, caregivers, state advisory board and council members, community advocates, and school leaders. Overall, more than 2,800 individuals have been engaged through meetings, listening sessions, and site visits, with a specific focus on connecting with those advocating for the needs of historically disadvantaged children, youth, and families.

As a follow up to the engagement summary provided in the transition report, themes collected from our second phase of outreach – organized by program area and/or audience – are detailed below.

Multigenerational Supports

Food and cash assistance, mental health, and out-of-school time programs

- **DCYF must proactively consider how programs and services meeting the needs of multiple generations at once will communicate, coordinate, and align.** Ensuring communication, coordination, and alignment among programs and staff, particularly in service delivery areas that are likely to serve multiple generations of a family at once and/or families in crisis – like food and income assistance programs – is integral to DCYF effectively meeting the needs of children, youth, and families and responding to historic inequities.
- **There are pervasive challenges for children's mental health supports.** Early care and education providers, parents and caregivers, advocates, counties, and Tribes consistently raised access, workforce, and affordability challenges faced when trying to respond to children's mental health issues at home, in care and education settings, and institutional settings – often exacerbated by more than one generation of the family struggling at once. They highlighted the need for intentional focus at DCYF on partnership with DHS, school districts, and counties to address the workforce shortage, increase diversity in the workforce, and reduce stigma for children, youth,

and families to improve mental health outcomes, particularly for children of color and children with disabilities.

- **Like many of the early educators in phase one of engagement, out-of-school time professionals' budgets and capacity are stretched thin.** Through a series of listening sessions with Ignite Afterschool, out-of-school time professionals shared the pervasive staff and funding shortages they are contending with, while doing their best to deliver high-quality before, after-school, and summer programs with the goals of: providing children and youth with rich, positive programming; supporting parents with the flexibility to work and know their children are cared for; and countering the growing inequities between opportunities available to low-income children and youth as opposed to more economically stable families. Much of the available funding comes from one-time grant resources creating uncertainty and instability for programs, further impacting recruitment and retention of a highly trained workforce. Like the Early Childhood Family Education and Community Education professionals engaged with in phase one of the IO's outreach, providers are hopeful DCYF will create more explicit, proactive public communications that more visibly underscore the value of their programs and the need for a well-resourced, professional workforce.

Multicultural Communities

- **If diversity and equity are a focus of the agency, commitment to these priorities must be reflected in and among DCYF's leadership.** As the IO launched recruitment for senior level positions in DCYF, state ethnic councils and multicultural community leaders shared the importance of having diverse representation at every stage of the recruitment process – from job postings, to recruitment, to resume review, and hiring – ultimately reflecting the values of the new agency in the people who take on these leadership positions. Many felt that the candidates selected for these roles would help to indicate whether the new agency would continue to be “business as usual” or would carve a new path that more equitably considers the needs and outcomes of children, youth, and families.
- **Latino parents and advocates see an opportunity to reset old and forge new partnerships.** A survey distributed through the Interagency Coordinating Council captured feedback from Latino parents whose children are receiving or have previously received Part C services. In follow-up phone conversations with some, they echoed many of the needs heard from other parents/advocates such as: the need for multilingual navigators; stronger partnership with OBGYNs, pediatricians, and child care professionals who can help inform parents about developmental delays and the resources available to them; and greater clarity on who is providing services (i.e., state vs. county vs. school district). An important point they raised specific to the Latino community was the opportunity DCYF has to strengthen cultural responsiveness with their community by proactively bringing their perspective into conversations and decisions around language that can and has historically generated feelings of confusion, stigma, and shame.

Parents and Advocates

- **The Children's Cabinet remains an asset.** Advocates shared a hope that the new agency will not undercut but rather will strengthen and widen the reach and impact of the Children's Cabinet

and underscored their desire for the partnership between the Children’s Cabinet and the new agency to focus on proactive policy and funding priorities across the Administration and early investments rather than just crisis services.

- **As DCYF evolves, the new agency should continue to reflect family and advocates’ recommendations.** Parents, providers, educators, and advocates were excited that the IO had taken into consideration and reflected their recommendations for how the agency should be structured, specifically their recommendations to have an office of innovation; office of family navigation; leaders coordinating and elevating the needs of children with mental health needs, disabilities, and Black and Native children; and early educators’ request to have child care services and early learning services housed under the same Administration. Many saw this as a good faith effort and are eager for it to lead to formalized, strong connections between DCYF and community statewide.
- **Optimism for the agency remained high following the conclusion of the legislative session.** Many advocates were relieved to see the funds included in the Supplemental Budget for coordination around children and families with disabilities and mental health needs made it through negotiations, which helped reaffirm that these services would be a priority for the new agency. While there was some surprise related to the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) programs not moving to DCYF, by May, community members understood that coordination between DCYF and other agencies will need to exist to holistically support families and that alignment between those programs and DCYF’s programs and priorities can occur.

Educators & School Districts

The IO expanded outreach to educators, education service providers, and school districts in this phase of engagement in 2024 and added focused staff leadership. Though many of the services initially transitioning to DCYF impact young children, those working with children throughout the K-12 years and beyond brought important feedback to the full scope of future agency work, its needed coordination with MDE and the education system.

- **As front-line educators and service providers, schools need avenues to work directly with human services to appropriately support both documented and undocumented families.** Educators and school social workers assist families with meeting their basic needs daily. Many communities find themselves fundraising and pooling donations to support neighbors when application systems or status prevent access to resources.
- **Schools seek a consistent collaboration model to work with counties to ensure more equitable outcomes.** Disparities across county service models and communication pathways between county and school district professionals were cited as barriers to supporting families. School social workers reported needing a common source for updated contacts when advocating for families or attempting to help them navigate complex systems.
- **Application systems for services that support multigenerational families can be further integrated.** When helping families navigate systems for support, precious time is spent entering the same information multiple times to access individual services. Where possible, technology systems that support the identification and service delivery of multiple family needs could represent a significant cost saving measure.

- **Equity of funding models for out-of-school time programs for districts should be examined.** With fewer staff members, rural and smaller districts as well as charter schools cite difficulty in tracking one-time grant funding for after-school programming.
- **Licensing discrepancies across state borders limit the ability of schools in rural areas to access needed service providers.** Schools in Greater Minnesota reported that finding skilled professionals to support student needs, such as psychologists, speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, and behavioral therapists, can be difficult. Those who may be geographically closest to the school are often prevented from serving in Minnesota schools due to licensing differences.

Tribal Engagement

Tribal Consultation

Direct engagement with Tribal leaders occurred at Tribal consultation meetings during the summer and fall of 2023. IO engagement staff accompanied other state agencies including DHS and MDE in their consultation with Tribal leaders. IO engagement staff were able to provide an overview of the new agency, information about the programs that were moving, and the vision for DCYF directly to Tribal leaders. The IO has also attended advisory council meetings and held one-on-one meetings on an ongoing basis with tribal program directors.

The themes which rose out of direct Tribal engagement were the need for increased ICWA compliance and business processes are not user friendly.

IO engagement staff have initiated a second round of one-on-one meetings with Tribal social services directors to gain further insight into issues regarding contracting and general business practices that will help inform ongoing partnership with DCYF.

State Advisory Councils

In addition to direct Tribal engagement, the IO engaged with Tribes and Tribal managers in a variety of state advisory councils and calls, including ICWA Advisory Council, TNEC (Tribal Nations Education Committee), Minnesota Tribal Resources for Early Childhood Care (MNTRECC), Tribal and Urban Indian Health Directors, and the Governor's Weekly Tribal Leader Call.

The top concerns by these groups to the IO engagement team were related to ICWA compliance, low high school graduation rates, and barriers to accessing many of the services transferring to DCYF – especially in rural areas.

Urban Indian Organizations and Programs

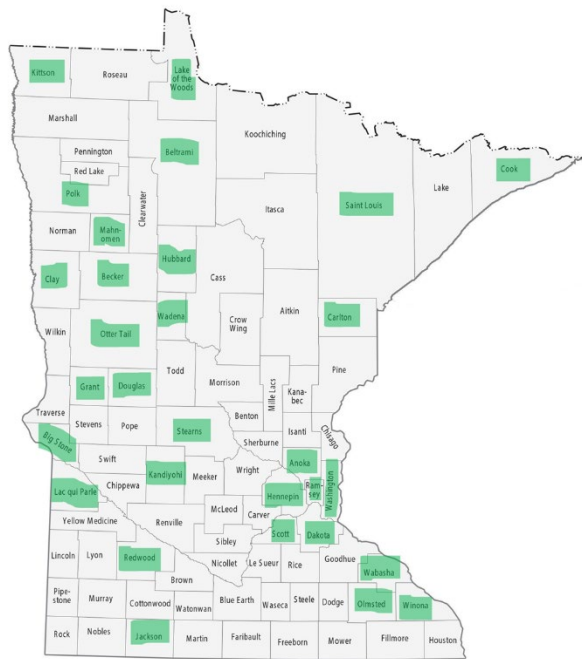
In addition, there are several urban Native organizations and programs that the IO has connected with regularly, including Minneapolis Urban Indian Directors (MUID), St. Paul Indians in Action (SIA), the Minneapolis American Indian Center (MAIC), the Division of Indian Work (DIW), the ICWA Law Center, and Ain Dah Yung.

Urban Native programs have expressed similar concerns as the Tribes with low ICWA compliance and inadequate supports for Native children and families in crisis; lengthy waiting periods for funding of some grant proposals; and poor communication with program liaisons at the state.

Early Care & Education Listening Sessions

As previously mentioned, the engagement strategy relies on leveraging the experience and relationships of contracted support holding county, Tribal, child care, and early education experience. In January 2024, the IO contracted with Indigenous Visioning LLC – a team of experts in Tribal, local, and state government, and early care and education, whose work is focused on building stronger Tribal communities through local, regional, statewide, and national partnerships.

From January to April 2024, listening sessions with families, family child care providers, and early education professionals explored questions and recommendations for DCYF.



Attendees represented 30 of Minnesota’s 81 counties, including: six Minnesota Initiative Foundation Regions; the Twin Cities metro area, via the Child Care Aware network (200+ child care and early care and education professionals); Minnesota Tribal Resources for Early Child Care (MNTRECC; 11 Tribal nations, parents and providers); and 60+ of Indigenous Visioning’s professional and personal contacts. Overall, the feedback across the sessions from families and providers revealed general positivity that the State of Minnesota wanted to hear from them about what is and is not working in the early care and education systems. Many positive anecdotes were shared about the kinds of programming, partnerships, and services that

allowed families to feel invested in early on and manage through difficult times, they included:

- Center for Inclusive Childcare (CICC)
- Child Care Aware regional grants
- Churches
- Community spaces like libraries, museums, parks, and community centers
- Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE)
- Early Childhood Initiative Foundations
- Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)
- Free trainings available on the Develop website
- Head Start/Community Action Partnership (CAP) agencies
- Health care clinics
- Help Me Grow
- Tribal resources to support tribal child care programs

On the other hand, there were concerns voiced that revealed a worry among parents and providers around how the new agency will actually be different and support improved outcomes for Native children and families.

Below are the primary challenges and recommendations shared by the parents and providers at the listening sessions:

Challenges Experienced by Early Care and Education Providers:

- **Licensing and Regulatory Challenges:**
 - There are inconsistent licensing standards and enforcement among counties and licensors.
 - Paperwork processes are complex and burdensome for maintaining providers' licensure and participating in programs like the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).
- **Financial and Operational Difficulties:**
 - There is insufficient financial support from the state for child care, and wages are low across the field, making it hard to attract and retain qualified staff.
 - Administrative workloads are very high for providers due to inefficient systems and redundant paperwork.
 - There is not adequate training or staff to support the number of children who require additional support services, especially for mental health and behavior needs.
- **Training and Professional Development:**
 - There is a critical need for more and adequately funded professional development opportunities that educate providers on culturally relevant best practices.
 - Navigating and completing training and certification for many providers remains challenging and complex.

Challenges Experienced by Families:

- **Access and Affordability:**
 - Child care costs are prohibitively high for many families, especially for those who fall just above the income eligibility thresholds for assistance programs.
 - Access is a huge issue – there are limited child care spots available for infants and toddlers, particularly in rural areas. Rural families also struggle with transportation to child care, even if there are options available.
- **Inequities in Support and Services:**
 - Families who have children with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing quality care due to stigma, inadequate reimbursement rates, and lack of program acceptance.
 - For many families, language and cultural barriers – as well as fear of government systems – hinder access to available services.

- **Complexity of Navigating Systems:**
 - Many families finding navigating the many different agencies and forms they have to communicate with and complete overwhelming and are frustrated by what is often a fragmented process for accessing financial supports and other resources.

Recommendations for DCYF:

- **Policy and Program Adjustments:**
 - Adjust income eligibility guidelines and increase subsidy rates to make child care more affordable and equitable for all families, including middle-income families who are financially stressed.
 - Revise the CCAP program to be more efficient and reduce the administrative burden on providers and families.
 - Centralize and streamline licensing processes and provide financial incentives to make it easier to become and remain a licensed provider.
- **Support for Providers:**
 - Increase financial support during transitions to new systems like the Provider Hub to manage the increased workload.
 - Create funding opportunities to hire additional staff equipped to support children with disabilities and behavioral challenges.
 - Provide access to a qualified substitute pool to prevent closures due to illness or other events.
- **Support for Families:**
 - Ensure no family pays more than 7% of their annual income for child care.
 - Develop a centralized portal for families to access all available supports and resources easily.
 - Increase investments in child care slots to reduce waitlists and improve access for families.
- **Training and Resources:**
 - Offer more culturally relevant and translated training for providers, especially in handling mental health and behavioral issues.
 - Expand access to and funding for professional development and training opportunities, including mental health coaching and specialized training for meeting the full range of children's needs.
 - Encourage collaboration and shared resources across different early childhood programs to enhance knowledge and service delivery.

Counties

During the 2023 legislative process, counties asked for a formal way to partner and engage with the new department, and the Administration, legislators, and county partners worked together on language that would require development of “recommendations for how to coordinate and partner with county and Tribal governments, including through the use of a governing authority, such as an intergovernmental advisory committee.” [MN Session Laws, 2023, Ch. 70.]

Since July 2023, the IO has regularly convened an advisory group of representatives from the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) and the Minnesota Association of County Social Service Administrators (MACSSA) that provided the transition team with vital county perspectives as the IO prepared for DCYF’s launch and continues to do so as programs are transferring to the agency through June 2025. The group also developed an intergovernmental advisory committee concept and associated legislative language that was refined in consultation and engagement from Tribes.

As a result, statute now requires that:

An intergovernmental advisory committee is established to provide advice, consultation, and recommendations to the DCYF commissioner on the planning, design, administration, funding, and evaluation of services to children, youth, and families. Each of Minnesota’s federally recognized Tribal Nations may, but is not required to, participate in the advisory committee required under this section. Notwithstanding section 15.059, the commissioner, each participating Tribal Nation, the Association of Minnesota Counties, and the Minnesota Association of County Social Services Administrators must codevelop and execute a process to administer the committee that ensures each participating Tribal Nation and each county are represented.¹

Co-development of that intergovernmental advisory committee is expected to get underway after DCYF’s County Relations Director is on board.

The IO met with counties and representatives of counties – both through the advisory group, and directly – to gain input on DCYF’s organizational structure, guiding principles and values, priorities, technology governance, and other operational matters that impact counties, as well as to gain county perspective on future engagement strategies. Below are highlights from those conversations:

- **Support equitable access and outcomes.** Counties highlighted a strong interest in Minnesota’s human services system focusing on equitable access to services and supports and achieving equitable outcomes. They have noted that partnering to assure that equitable staffing (including training, expertise, and other elements of staff capacity), access to administrative supports (including technology, policies and practices that align with this focus), and funding all require attention in pursuit of this priority.
- **Apply a strength-based, multi-generational, whole-family approach.** Counties support a holistic approach to serving people, especially those with complex situations and needs. DCYF’s Whole Family Systems approach aligns with this interest.

¹ MN Session Laws, 2024, Ch. 115, Art. 15, §12.

- **Maximize value of the county human services system.** The feedback provided by counties on a variety of matters can often be summarized as an interest in getting the best value – in efficiency and outcome – from the public resources invested. DCYF should amplify the investment of federal, state, Tribal, and county funds and the time and energy of a limited, dedicated workforce through smart, efficient, research-informed approaches to get the best outcomes in the nation. Following is a sample of approaches counties identified that could be taken in pursuit of this interest:
 - **Partner effectively with counties and Tribes** as DCYF’s key local partners in delivering and funding human services.
 - **Take advantage of counties’ and tribes’ recognized role in their community** as a conduit and/or provider of a broad array of services (public health, human services, housing, justice, etc.) as well as their knowledge of the local economy, services, etc.
 - **Significantly improve technology systems** to most effectively support people we serve and the county and Tribal staff who serve them.
 - **Align state policies and practices** (including technology) across programs to coherently and efficiently support families and individuals.
 - **Apply data and research in policy and investment decision-making**, and make data accessible for local, real-time, informed decision-making.
 - **Communicate with counties** in efficient, cohesive, and timely manner.
 - **Develop the human services workforce** and build capacity.
 - **Collaboratively lead** in human services – informed by county and Tribal experience.
 - **Foster innovation** by testing new approaches through agile development and supporting counties prepared to step into more innovative space.
 - **Meet counties where they’re at and with strength-based approach.**

Engagement and feedback will continue through the transition and beyond as DCYF is established and evolves over the coming years. The IO thanks the many families, providers, educators, and others who have shared their time and expertise to help improve state systems and service delivery. If you have feedback or would further like to partner with the IO, please visit the [Implementation Office webpage](#). If you would like to learn more about the Department of Children, Youth and Families, please visit [their website](#).