

CENTERING COMMUNITY: SHIFTING POWER + RELATIONSHIPS

By Jeanette Bocanegra, José Faus and Josefa Sherer

Driving change that will last requires centering community. But what does that mean? What does it look like when done well? What are some of the common mistakes systems and organizations make trying to engage and center community? We came together for a Wellbeing Blueprint event (“Centering Community: Shifting Power & Relationships”) to offer our perspectives on these questions. This resource is a synthesis of what came out of that valuable conversation. We hope it can support your efforts to drive change.

WHAT DOES CENTERING COMMUNITY MEAN?

- Centering community has to start with valuing the members of the community; getting to know the history, the stories of the community and not rewriting those stories for them.
- This means the people most impacted by the issues drive the decisions about what the solutions are, the needs are and what the change process should be — from the beginning. That’s different from just getting people’s input. It means seeing humans, not problems to be fixed.
- It means never talking about an unmet need or risk without also talking about the incredible resilience, skills and assets community members have to offer.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE WHEN WE DO IT WELL?

- We are building authentic relationships based on trust, respect and transparency that allow for co-creation and sharing power with community.
- There’s a willingness to look at what has happened in the past and acknowledge and apologize for harms.
- Community is at the table and resourced with the same information and context that system leaders have so there is equal footing through all phases of the work.
- There’s a recognition that it takes time and energy outside of professional work hours and schedules.
- There’s a community accountability strategy in place and individuals who are tracking progress and holding public leaders and systems accountable.

WHAT ARE COMMON MISTAKES PEOPLE IN ORGANIZATIONS AND SYSTEMS MAKE WHEN ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITIES?

- Assuming that all that’s needed is to show up and state what the organization/system is going to do and then expecting people to be grateful.
- Letting institutional ego get in the way and not being humble.
- Coming into the community as the conqueror or as a colonist imposing outside ideas on the community.

next page >

WHAT ARE THE LEGACIES OF WHITE SUPREMACY AND COLONIZATION IN YOUR FIELD THAT LEAD YOUR ORGANIZATION TO PRESCRIBE SOLUTIONS FOR COMMUNITIES?

- Not taking responsibility for actions. The community knows the difference between people who act authentically and people who are just doing something as a “check-the-list” transaction.
- Not making communities feel welcomed and respected.
- Extracting valuable experience from the community by just inviting the community to “tell their story” without decision-making power.
- Not engaging community in true partnership.
- Not challenging each other to be much more creative.
- Cutting corners by relying on what regulations require of us instead of taking on the hard work of what we know in our gut works really well.
- Not recognizing where power imbalance comes into play and how those with power granted to them make rules and policies that deprive adults of their dignity.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jeannette Bocanegra is the Executive Director of Justice for Families. In 2010, Jeannette joined Community Connections for Youth (CCFY) as the lead New York City researcher for the Justice for Families Participatory Action Research project, which mobilized the family members of incarcerated youth to collect data on the parent experience with the juvenile justice system. She developed the organization’s Family Strengthening portfolio, and also initiated the groundbreaking Parent Support Program in partnership with the NYC Department of Probation. She served as an advisory board member for several juvenile justice initiatives in New York City as a voice for families. Prior to joining CCFY, Jeannette was an active educational activist and parent organizer who worked to mobilize parents for more than twenty five years. She took on the role of advocating for families with youth in the juvenile justice system based on her own difficult experiences as the parent of an incarcerated youth. She strives to ensure that young people who have come in contact with the juvenile justice system are given a second chance to become productive members of their communities, and to provide families with the tools and resources to help their children succeed.

José Faus is a multi-disciplinary artist and writer who came to Kansas City as a child from Bogota, Columbia. He is an integral part of Kansas City’s art scene and a community influencer. Faus is a founding member of the Latino Writers Collective and serves on the boards of Charlotte Street Foundation, UMKC Friends of the Library and Nuevo Eden. He has created many mural works in the Kansas City area, Mexico and Bolivia, where he received a cultural ambassador grant from the U.S. State Department.

Josefa Scherer, MPH, seeks to find inroads for critical public health approaches in her life and work. She engages with this radical and expansive praxis as a member of her local board of public health; a supervisor for the Adult Protective Services (APS) program at LifePath, serving Berkshire, Franklin and Western Worcester counties; as a full-spectrum doula; and as part of a working farm family in rural Massachusetts. Cultivating an ethic of care in these various contexts offers exciting and challenging opportunities to focus on the ways in which social connections and interdependence are essential. Josefa’s most recent work on systems change focuses on expanding LifePath’s approach to neglect; addressing harm and reducing abuse and neglect by holding community members accountable to each other while acknowledging the multidimensional nature of receiving and providing care over the lifespan, during a pandemic and situated in class, race and gender-based reality.