



FAMILY MEMBERS/CAREGIVERS: THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE SERVING ON ADVISORY BOARDS



Family-Informed
Trauma Treatment Center

INTRODUCTION

The Family-Informed Trauma Treatment Center (FITT), in partnership with NCTSN's Partnering with Youth and Families Committee (PWYFC), developed this tool as a companion to the [Advisory Board FAQ](#). It's based on contributions of family members and caregivers who previously participated on Advisory Boards. Throughout this document is the voice of a foster parent who shared the details of her experience to help others.

A PARTNER IN
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The National Child
Traumatic Stress Network

What is an Advisory Board?

Advisory Boards for health care and other human service organizations provide feedback about how to improve care and services. Some Advisory Boards include family members only and some combine family members with providers.

Getting Started

Like many new experiences, serving on an Advisory Board may bring excitement but also some nervous feelings. To help with making a good decision about joining or not, this tool is divided into four sections: *Motivations to Join, Preparation, The Experience, The Risks and Things to Consider Ahead of Time.*



MOTIVATIONS TO JOIN

Some wanted to improve or “fix” services to help others in the future; some had a great experience and wanted to contribute to future success of the program; some saw serving on a board as an extension of a good experience; some wanted to continue their personal healing journey through giving back and some had professional or educational goals that made serving on an Advisory Board appealing.

Here are some other reasons people shared. What might be true for you as consider why you might say yes to this experience?

- *To help create what wasn't available to me and my family when we went through hard times.*
- *To give meaning to the hard experiences I went through by giving back.*
- *To show others there is hope.*
- *To further my personal and professional growth.*

“For many years I fostered children and it was an exhausting, frustrating, but also rewarding experience. Years of fostering eventually led me to being burned out. I still wanted to make a difference in the lives of children and give them a chance at a good life. I was sad and angry a lot, and most of all I felt disposable to the child welfare system. Imagine my surprise when they asked me to be on their advisory board. How was I supposed to respond to their request? My thoughts and emotions were all over the place.”

PREPARATION

Some may wonder, why are you asking me and what can I offer?

Advisory Boards need a variety of perspectives, for example: parents or caregivers (biological, adoptive, foster, relative), young people, women, men, BIPOC (Black Indigenous Persons of Color), people for whom English is the second language and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer). It is always important to find out if you will be the only person representing a particular perspective.



Invitations to join boards may come after some ups and down in the relationship. Maybe an individual complained about the program or there was a conflict related to a rule or policy. Sometimes those situations help the organization realize that they need input from someone willing to be honest about the experience and help with making improvements.

Below are information or supports that family members/caregivers said they would like to have had ahead of time. Think about what would help you make your decision.

- *Purpose, goals and roles played by members of the Advisory Board.*
- *Frequency of meetings and how they are run.*
- *Buddy or mentor to share information about the culture of the Advisory Board and the larger organization it is connected with.*

What can help to prepare for participation on an Advisory Board?

There may be a rush to get you to commit but it is important to be informed about what you are getting into. Some family members/caregivers found it helpful to attend a meeting to observe before making the decision. Being invited by a person you already know can be very helpful. Whether you know the person or not, it is a good idea to have a conversation about what to expect. If you decide the time isn't right, ask if you could be considered for a future opportunity.

Below are supports or skills that family members/caregivers noted they would like to have had ahead of time. Take a look and see if any of these ideas might be helpful to you.

- *Taking part in an orientation.*
- *Practicing using my voice and telling my story in a way that is meaningful but not too personal.*
- *Learning ways to respond to triggers and manage conflict.*

What prepared you for the experience of serving on an Advisory Board?

For some people there is a need to heal from the trauma and from experiences in systems that weren't great. Systems have flaws and often the former participant in services is being invited to help fix those flaws.

Below are experiences that family members/caregivers said prepared them for serving on an Advisory Board. Think about what might be true for you.

- *A personal journey through trauma.*
- *Previous experience with services and systems.*
- *Previous work experience with meetings, conference calls, emails etc.*

“When I was asked to join the board to advise them on how to improve foster care, the person who reached out to me was someone I trusted. I told her that I wasn't sure I could be nice and that some things I might say could be hurtful. She told me, “Good. We need honest feedback if we are going to make change. We chose you for your bravery.” I was still scared but I decided I could try it out and see if what she said was true.”

THE EXPERIENCE

Individuals vary in their responses to participating on Advisory Boards. For some it's great, for some it's not great and for some it may be a combination. It can be a big deal to see yourself going from being an outsider "consuming" the services to a full or even partial "insider." This quick change in point of view may bring a feeling of uncertainty. Some recommend finding a trusted ally to talk it through with, at the beginning and along the way.



Here are ways family members/caregivers described their experiences:

- *It was intimidating at first, but ice breakers and understanding the agenda helped.*
- *It was wonderful and fulfilling.*
- *It was great to be part of a team, each person with different and important things to offer.*
- *Giving back and connecting with others that have similar stories were equally valuable.*

"I went from someone who had little voice and choice to someone who was sought out. It was overwhelming to reconcile my different thoughts and feelings about how I was seen by the organization. I was angry sometimes: "Oh so now you are listening!" I was relieved sometimes: "Thank goodness you can hear me and we are on the same team."



THE RISKS

What if any risks are there in serving on an Advisory Board?

Serving on an Advisory Board will call you to make recommendations based on your experiences. This requires you to be somewhat vulnerable. Also, serving on an Advisory Board requires time and effort. If your life is too busy, consider passing on the current opportunity. More chances will come your way!

Here are additional risks that family members/caregivers identified:

- *Sharing my experience and recommendations but being ignored.*
- *Sharing too much about my trauma history and then regretting it.*
- *That something bad would happen while I was serving which would cause me to have to quit the board.*
- *The system could hurt me again and then I would behave in a way that would be embarrassing.*

“Because of my ups and downs with the agency, I was worried at first that if something went wrong, I’d be triggered by feeling devalued and that I might lose my composure.”

What if any benefits are there to serving on an Advisory Board?

Some people have great experiences which become part of their overall journey. When that hard work pays off, everyone can see how valuable it was. The system helped the family member/caregiver and the family member/caregiver helped the system.

Here are additional benefits that family members/caregivers identified:

- *Feeling validated by people I respect through compensation and through positive feedback.*
- *Seeing recommendations taken seriously and used in other products and projects.*
- *Gaining a new group of friends with hard experiences in common.*



THINGS TO CONSIDER AHEAD OF TIME

Start with making a plan. Using this tool and other resources, get any questions you have answered prior to making the decision. Find a support person with whom you can air out any concerns you have. Consider what you may need to do to prepare.

Think of joining an Advisory Board as a learning experience. It's ok not to know everything including what questions to ask! Keep in mind that your perspective is the most important contribution you will bring to an Advisory Board. You don't have to be perfect or have a particular "resume" to be a valuable Advisory Board member.

Have a plan in mind should you need support or debriefing as you move through the experience. Leaving an Advisory Board doesn't have to be the only option if things aren't feeling comfortable. There are situations that can be worked through with positive outcomes for everyone in the end. It's also true that if it really isn't a good fit, it's ok to step down. This isn't a failure, it's a choice about what is best for you.

"Over time I became more comfortable with being a member of the board and speaking my mind. I was able to offer insight to the members and I felt heard. I have days when I get upset and feel less than a full team member. Fortunately, I continue to make myself and the system better. I know in my heart that everyone is doing the best they can, or they wouldn't even be on this board with me. Now I feel less like a quitter and more like an advocate."

ABOUT FITT

The Family-Informed Trauma Treatment Center (FITT) Center at the University of Maryland partners with families, providers, and local and national networks to increase behavioral health equity for children and families who have experienced chronic trauma and stress. Learn more at: <https://thefittcenter.org/>

ABOUT NCTSN

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) was created by Congress in 2000 as part of the Children's Health Act to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for children and families who experience or witness traumatic events. This unique network of frontline providers, family members, researchers, and national partners is committed to changing the course of children's lives by improving their care and moving scientific gains quickly into practice across the U.S. Learn more at <https://nctsn.org>

Special thanks to the members of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network's Partnering with Youth and Family Committee for sharing their knowledge to make this resource possible.

