

OREGON FOOD BANK

Client Engagement

Best Practices

Toolkit

1st Edition



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Section o: Common Language Glossary

Clients - Anyone your organization serves

Staff- Anyone who is employed, or volunteers at your organization

Agency/Agent- A person's ability to take action, be effective, influence their own life, and assume responsibility for their behavior

Labor - The physical or emotional work one does to meet the needs of others, especially work done to meet the needs/wants of those in positions of power

Section 1: Centering Clients & shifting power

Best Practices

This toolkit is intended to be an introduction to recommended, and researched methods, and strategies that hold clients at the center of service delivery. However, there are many ways to do this work, and this is in no way intended to be a definitive list. We encourage you to find new ways to engage, get feedback from your clients, and to share those new strategies with your colleagues.

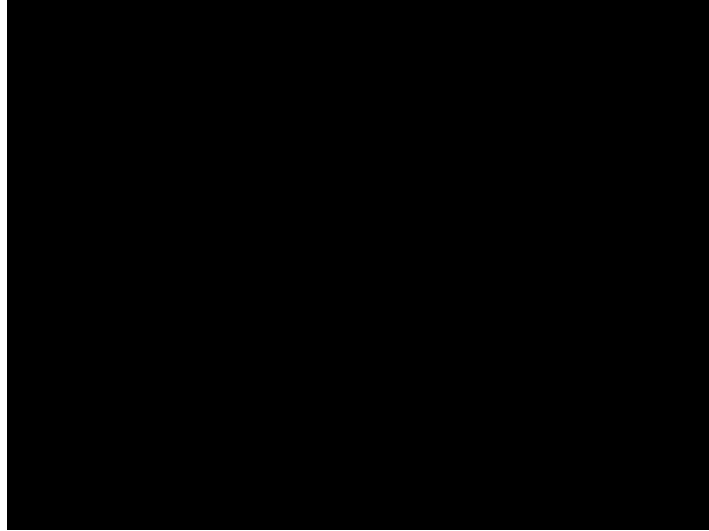
Why We Center Clients

Person or client-centered service models come out of decades of research, first publicized by Carl Rogers in the 1940's. This research has shown that when service organizations recognize clients as experts in their lived experiences, and support clients in identifying their own strengths and goals, that services have a more lasting, and powerful impact on clients. Centering client experience also allows us to better support the clients' agency in making specific food choices that better meet their food security needs. It is also an understanding that it is the system, not the people suffering under it, that created hunger and its root causes, and it fosters service delivery that is collaborative, and more individualized, rather than dictated by the organization.

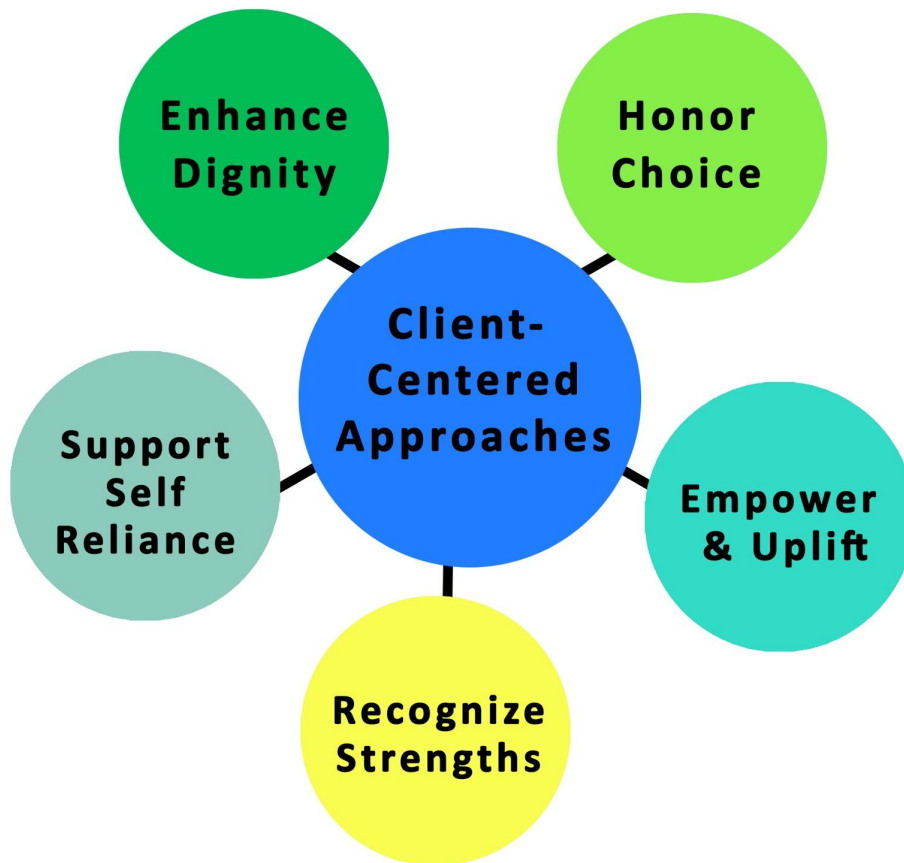
"We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know." - Carl Rogers, [Empathetic: An Unappreciated Way of Being](#)

Key principles for a client-centered approach:

- Those with a lived experienced hunger are the experts on hunger
- Personal connections are crucial
- Create safe environments
- Keep questions open-ended
- Utilize assertive engagement techniques
- Validate & uplift experiences
- Lead with empathy & non-judgement



<https://youtu.be/y77y7XW8GtE>



Shifting Power: A New Leadership

Power is often defined as the degree of control one has over the material, human, intellectual and financial resources in a society. This control of resources then becomes a source of both individual, and social power. Thus it is crucial to client-centered approaches that organizations push back against the power dynamics dominant culture perpetuates, and find lasting ways to give power back to the marginalized communities that are most impacted by hunger, and its root causes.

Part of shifting power is recognizing the amount of unpaid labor that is regularly being asked of clients when engaging with services. To push back against this, it is recommended that organizations provide client(s) with an appropriate amount of compensation when utilizing these, and other client engagement strategies. This will look different for every program, every engagement strategy, and every client; find a compensation structure that works for your organization.

Section 2: Client Engagement Methods & Strategies

Client Satisfaction Surveys

From client advisory boards, to hiring practices that prioritize lived experience, client engagement can look many ways depending on a program's mission, and resources. A client satisfaction survey is often a good place to start a client engagement strategic plan. A simple survey of *less than 12 questions* allows for short, but meaningful engagements, without asking for too much labor from clients. Scheduling regular client satisfaction surveys two or more times a year, as well as anytime you start a new program, is recommended. Questions should be open-ended whenever possible, and surveyors should be patient, and note relevant client comments, even when they stray from the survey questions.

It is also recommended that surveys be administered by staff who do not generally work during program service hours, when possible. Clients may be reluctant to speak openly about a program with the people who run that program due to perceived social norms, and uneven power dynamics, so creating a space where clients feel comfortable sharing difficult opinions is crucial. Comment boxes are another good way to solicit more anonymous client feedback.

Assertive Engagement

Assertive Engagement (AE) "... is a social service approach to working with people that honors them as the experts in their own lives. Assertive Engagement can apply holistically to clients, service organizations, supervisors, agencies, and systems by helping us navigate power dynamics and use empathy in our interactions. The initiative aims to support and complement frameworks centered on equity, anti-oppression, and trauma informed care." - The Assertive Engagement Initiative at Multnomah County

AE is a synthesis of evidence-based practices including Motivational Interviewing, Strength-Based Practice, Assertive Community Treatment, active listening, trauma informed care, harm reduction, anti-oppression, and unconditional positive regard. It helps ensure service

that is more compassionate, mindful, and equitable by prioritizing meeting each client where they're at.

Here are a few important tools for an assertive engagement approach:

- Practice active listening strategies, giving undivided attention to the client during interactions
 - Give your full attention to clients, avoid taking notes, and using cellphones while interacting with clients
 - Avoid gendered language, and do not assume a person's pronoun based on their appearance
 - Do not attempt to relate to experiences, or identities that you do not personally hold
 - Do attempt to remember the clients name!
 - Repeat, question, and paraphrase key points back to the client, to ensure they were properly understood
- Recognizing clients as both agents, and experts of their own lives
 - Avoid telling clients what they need; instead ask open-ended questions
 - Focus on relationship building, and explicitly recognizing client strengths
 - Do not give your opinions about communities or groups you are not a part of
 - Reiterate to the client that they are the person who is best suited to make their food choices
- Ask Offer Ask
 - Ask what they already know
 - Ask if you can provide additional information
 - Offer the information
 - Ask what they think
- All change is self-change. Staff can change their approach to their work but only clients can change their own lives
- Reluctance to change is not resistance
- Ambivalence, or holding two conflicting opinions about the same issue, is normal

Four Basic Steps to Active Listening

Paraphrase

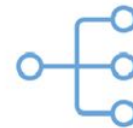
Restate the same information the client has said using different words. This allows the client to confirm their intent

Welcome!

1

Summarize

Summarizing means staff concisely reiterates main points of the discussion to help clients identify ideas



2

Reflect

Reflecting back on the conversation will allow clients, to feel heard, and understand how their story or message is received by other people



4

Clarify

Clarification gives clients space to re-state, or explain any ideas that staff may have misunderstood



3

Motivational Interviewing

Motivational Interviewing is a communication style that is used by behavioral health professionals, medical providers, criminal justice professionals, and others, to assist in the change process by helping a client develop internal motivation and overcome ambivalence. This is different from traditional techniques where the helping professional often tells the client what they need to do to change their lives.

Principles of Motivational Interviewing



EMPATHY



DEVELOP
DISCREPANCY



AVOID
ARGUMENT



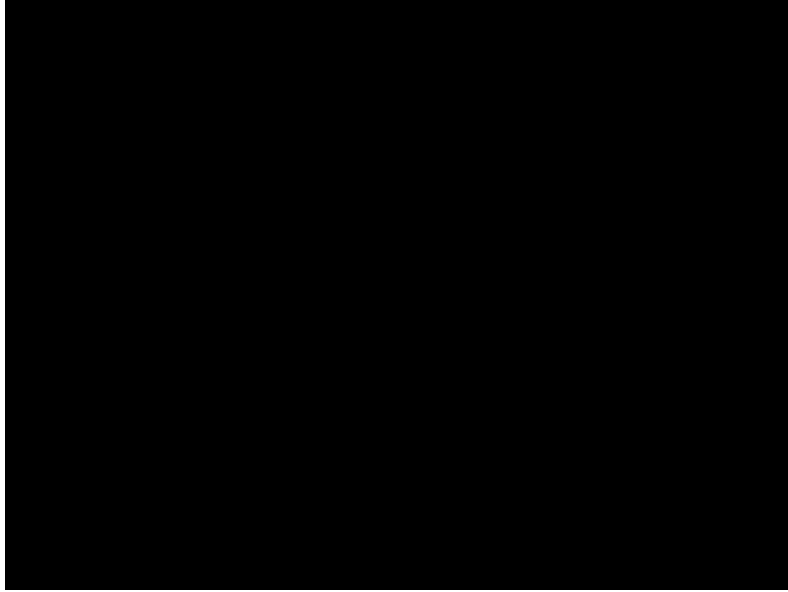
SELF
EFFICACY

Importance of Empathy & Non-judgement

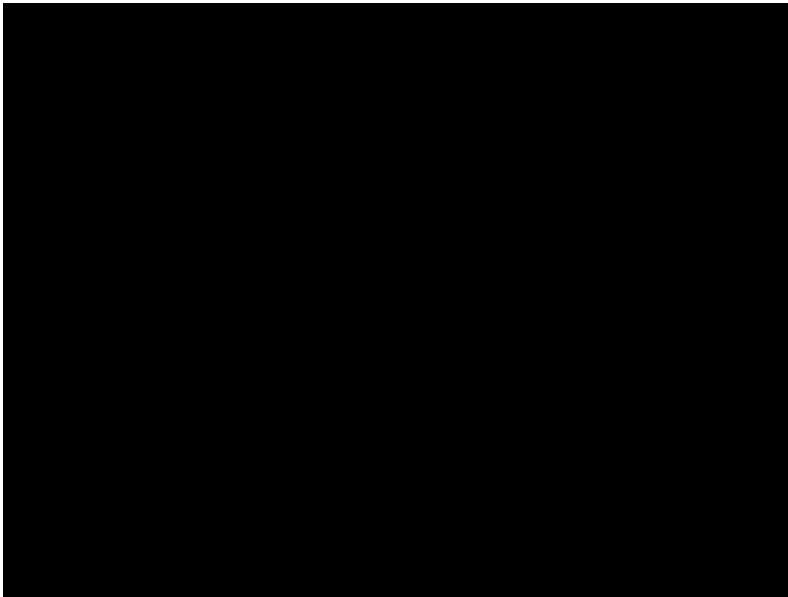
Empathy is the experience of understanding another person's thoughts, feelings, and condition from their point of view, rather than from one's own. Empathy facilitates interactions that are positive, and helpful, that come from within a person, so that they are better able to work from a place of compassion. While empathy looks different in each of us, research suggests it is possible to boost one's capacity for empathic understanding.

Strategies to encourage empathy, and create non-judgemental environments

- Recognizing that empathy is often difficult to learn, strive to be intentional in treating clients with kindness, and patience
- Focus on the humanity, and dignity of the people you're serving
 - It's not necessary to understand someone, or their experience, in order to recognize their humanity, and treat them with kindness
- Prioritize recruiting staff and volunteers with lived experiences of poverty, and hunger for all levels of the organization
- Staff must believe that clients are capable rather than difficult, challenging, resistant etc.
- Resist using negative language about clients. If clients are described in negative terms when they are not present or in paperwork, it will affect how they are treated in person
- Client-centered thinking leads to client-centered practices, which lead to client-centered organizations, and systems.



[The Importance of Empathy](#)



[Brene Brown on Empathy](#)

Trauma-Informed Environments

Trauma-impacted individuals may be experiencing a lot of stress, anxiety, and fear when accessing services. If the organization is able to provide a trauma-informed environment, clients will be better able to relax, and open up to staff about their food security needs. Further, staff should attempt to engage clients with empathy, compassion, and non-judgement. Helping everyone to feel emotionally healthy with each other, and for each other, will add to the safety of the space for staff and clients alike.

Trauma-informed environments offer tools in the physical space that invite self regulation, such as cold water to drink, calm music, natural light, organized intake processes, clean restrooms, soothing art, accessible seating options, and a supply of fidget material accessible to clients. Staff should also create a welcoming environment where clients feel seen, and their experiences validated.

A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed seeks to:

- *Realize* the widespread impact of trauma;
- *Recognize* the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system;
- *Respond* by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and
- Seeks to actively *resist* re-traumatization

Section 3: Personal & Professional Boundaries

Personal & Professional Boundaries

Personal & professional boundaries can sometimes feel like barriers to service, but to best create a trauma-informed environment, it's important to prioritize the safety of everyone who shares a space. Staff should avoid allowing their personal beliefs to interfere with the organization's commitment to clients, or to jeopardize the best interests of clients. Food is a human right, and one that people should be able to access without judgement.

Other concerns in regards to boundaries are issues of unequal power dynamics between the client and staff, as well as personal safety factors which are present anytime we reveal sensitive, or identifying personal information to people we do not know well.

Points to remember when establishing professional boundaries:

- Avoid giving out personal contact information
- Keep your social media secure, and do not add clients that you do not have a pre-existing relationship with
- Never disclose confidential information

- If you do not know if the information is confidential, then do not disclose it
- Refrain from discussing personal lives with clients, outside of peer support
- Do not enter into romantic or sexual relationships with clients

Organizational Information

- Strive to be transparent in goals, and decision-making processes
- Post policies, rules, and regulations in public areas, where they are clearly visible to all clients
- Post in multiple locations, if possible
- Involve clients in the decision-making process
- Keep online information up-to-date. Websites, and social media are often the first places clients seek out resources

Physical Safety

One of the most effective ways to establish clear professional boundaries is to let your behavior set the standard for meetings with a client. It is important not to touch clients, generally, but especially not in any inappropriate way, or any way that they might perceive as harmful. Inappropriate forms of touching might include hugging, caressing, or holding your client's hand. While you might think these gestures show compassion or care, it is possible they could make the client feel uncomfortable and as if they are in an exploitative dynamic. Always ask yourself “Is there any way the client might be psychologically harmed by this touching?” If yes, or unsure, then avoid making physical contact with the client.

Section 4: Training & Evaluation

Organizational Assessment & Evaluation Tools

There are many ways to evaluate an organization’s capacity as a trauma-informed, and client-centered organization. Trauma Informed Oregon, and Portland State University have put together a Standards of Practice document for trauma-informed service organizations.

[Standards of Practice for Trauma- Informed Care](#)

The University of Minnesota has put together a [Person-Centered Organizational Development Tool](#) which organizations may also find helpful.

Recommended Training List

- Trauma informed trainings
 - Trauma Informed Practice Supporting Clients Who Have Experienced Complex Trauma Presentation <http://tiny.cc/o9gl3y>
 - Trauma Informed Oregon Training Modules <http://tiny.cc/eb4v3y>
- Mental health first aid - Free training offered through a partnership of Portland Metro counties <http://tiny.cc/9ehl3y>
- Assertive Engagement - Free 3-day training offered through Multnomah County, and available to all OFB Partner Agencies <http://tiny.cc/7fhl3y>
- De-escalation + crisis intervention <https://www.ywcapdx.org/de-escalation/>

Recommended Reading List

- ACEs and Nourishment <http://tiny.cc/rtvq5y>
- Using a trauma-informed policy approach to create a resilient urban food system <http://tiny.cc/pzvq5y>
- Trauma-Informed Toolkit for Service Providers (Canada) <http://tiny.cc/q5vq5y>
- Trauma-Informed Care for Food Pantries & Meal Sites <http://tiny.cc/7cwq5y>
- Culture: Creating an environment that respects the dignity of each client and where opportunities are available to build skills <http://tiny.cc/2pwq5y>



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