

# Creating a Consumer Advisory Council

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The inclusion of patients and consumer leaders in health care quality improvement initiatives can help ensure that projects meet their goals. Patients and consumer leaders can serve as agents of change, partnering with other stakeholders to improve the health of the community. To effectively engage consumers, project leaders or organizers should seek out representatives of patients and families. A patient with a chronic condition and a representative of a consumer advocacy organization that serves a specific population are examples of candidates qualified to represent consumers.

One way to ensure that consumers have a voice in shaping and advising quality improvement initiatives is by creating a consumer council, board, or body. This fact sheet outlines a set of best practices to help guide you as you create any form of a Consumer Advisory Council (CAC).

## **Secure buy-in from existing Board members and senior leadership to create a Consumer Advisory Council.**

- ▶ Raise awareness about the importance and value of a CAC among existing leadership.
  - ▶ Support from senior leadership is necessary to build political will to achieve real and sustainable impact from consumer and patient engagement. Positive working relationships with consumers will result in more patient-centered efforts and improved health outcomes.
- ▶ Meet with relevant parties to solicit feedback about the process of creating and working with a CAC.
  - ▶ A CAC can only be effective if it is supported by project leaders. Leadership and appropriate committees should determine how the larger quality improvement initiative will act on the CAC's decisions and recommendations.

## **Identify council members and together determine the roles and responsibilities of the Consumer Advisory Council.**

- ▶ Council members should be recruited by networking with community partners and consumer organizations and through internal recommendations.
- ▶ It is important to discuss their skills and interests with patient and consumer leaders and develop the CAC roles and responsibilities *with them*, to maximize their effectiveness and sustain their involvement.
- ▶ Recognize the challenges patient and consumer leaders face.

- ▶ Patients and consumer leaders can share insights into what factors may hinder their engagement (e.g., limited time and resources), and any strategies the initiative can use to offset those factors (e.g., finding meeting times that work for most members' schedules, providing reimbursement for mileage or other expenses incurred when attending meetings).

**Formalize the role of the Consumer Advisory Council by creating a written document to outline its principal functions.**

- ▶ Once the patients, consumer leaders and other stakeholders have determined the roles and tasks appropriate for the CAC, they should formalize those roles in a written document, like a council charter.
- ▶ Important considerations include:
  - ▶ How often will the CAC meet? Where will it meet?
  - ▶ How long will member terms last? What types of positions and how many will be available?
  - ▶ Are members appointed or is there an application process? How are new members selected?
  - ▶ How will CAC recommendations be communicated to the other stakeholders, boards and bodies?
  - ▶ What processes can be formalized to ensure that consumers are equal stakeholders?
- ▶ Develop ground rules for CAC membership and meetings
  - ▶ What if a member is unable to fulfill the agreed upon expectations?
  - ▶ What is the preferred method of communication? Will there be a listserv?
  - ▶ CAC members should agree on policies to ensure effective meetings. These policies could include turning off all cell phones and PDAs during meetings or guidelines on how to solve internal disputes.

**Ensure the Consumer Advisory Council is integrated within the greater organization.**

- ▶ The CAC should not function as a silo. It should be an integrated part of the health care quality improvement effort. Patients and consumer leaders should be empowered to provide feedback and recommendations on activities and deliverables. They should be active partners involved in decision making, strategic planning, resource development and outreach to the community.
- ▶ Implement a formalized decision-making process within the CAC to ensure all CAC stakeholders have an opportunity to meaningfully engage.
- ▶ Communicate to the CAC and other boards and bodies the process for integrating CAC decisions and recommendations into quality improvement activities. These boards and bodies should include CAC members and/or consumer representation.

**Orient all stakeholders to the goals of the Consumer Advisory Council. Orient members of the Consumer Advisory Council to the goals, mission and vision of the larger organization.**

- ▶ Make sure council members possess a thorough understanding of the organization and/or quality improvement initiative and its priorities and overall goals.
- ▶ Make sure CAC members understand and can carry out their CAC roles and responsibilities.
- ▶ Help council members understand the CAC charter, the decision-making process, available support and CAC ground rules.
- ▶ Orientation is not only for council members. It should include other stakeholders as well. Raise awareness with the team about strategies for meaningful engagement and let them know how to include consumers. Ensure that all stakeholders and staff know why the consumers are at the table so they can make the new council members feel welcome, solicit feedback and benefit from their involvement.

**Designate staff to support and maintain the membership of the Consumer Advisory Council.**

- ▶ Provide CAC members with relevant quality improvement and health care resources to enhance their knowledge.
- ▶ Brief CAC members regularly on all initiative goals and deliverables, solicit feedback and invite CAC members to assist in shaping these efforts.
- ▶ Conduct surveys to gauge the CAC members' experiences with the CAC and the overall initiative. Survey findings should drive the governance and multi-stakeholder facilitation improvement processes.

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