

Frequently Asked Questions

Why should we have a Family Advisory Committee? What are the benefits?

Family Advisory Committees:

- Allows families to give each other ongoing mutual support and encouragement. Sharing thoughts and feelings with others who are in the same situation can help family members cope.
- Provides a forum for learning – e.g. understand individual and family rights; keep informed about the organization’s vision, mission and values as they guide the provision of programs and services; other relevant topics of interest
- Provides an opportunity to become knowledgeable about the organization’s operations, policies and practices. This can be especially helpful for families of individuals who are newly supported by the organization.
- Can help families and the organization form a positive partnership aimed at improving programs and services.
- Offers family members a chance to express their collective inquiries, input and feedback – a “united voice” supporting a “united effort.” In this way, a Family Advisory Committee can be a catalyst for positive changes in the lives of persons served, families’ experiences and in the organization in general
- Can benefit persons served who are physically or mentally unable to voice their needs, preferences and concerns as well as those without family
- Can benefit the organization by providing a means for staff to deal directly with families as a group and establish meaningful ongoing lines of communication. For example, staff may be able to use the Family Advisory Committee as a sounding board for new ideas
- Ultimately, improves the quality of life of persons served, and supports their families

Are organizations required to have a Family Advisory Committee? What considerations contribute to the success of a Family Advisory Committee?

Developmental Services organizations in Ontario are not required to have, host or offer a Family Advisory Committee (or similar label such as Family Committee).

Although there can be many benefits to an effective, productive and constructive Family Advisory Committee, the overall success of the Committee is dependent upon considerations such as:

- Interest level of, and participation by family members;

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- Organizational commitment to supporting the establishment and maintenance of a Family Advisory Committee;
- Family participants adherence to the scope, and terms of reference of the Family Advisory Committee;
- An ongoing commitment by the organization and by the Family Advisory Committee to work collaboratively, respectfully and cooperatively to support the betterment of the programs and services provided by the organization, and consequently to improve the quality of life of the persons served by the organization

If a family member has a concern, should that go to the Family Advisory Committee?

It is important to be clear about what a Family Advisory Committee can and cannot do. A Family Advisory Committee handles group concerns, not individual concerns. Family members with specific individual concerns should speak to the appropriate staff and administration of the organization.

What topics may be discussed at a Family Advisory Committee meeting?

Typical standing / regular agenda items (eg. every meeting) may include:

- *Education item – may be suggested by the Committee or by the organization. Examples such as: how to have meaningful visits with your loved one, better understanding the abilities and capabilities of our persons served, overview of the purpose and intent of a Person Centered Support Plan, learn more about changes to the Ontario Autism Program (OAP), learn more about the government’s Developmental Services Reform initiative, learn more about compliance matters such as Quality Assurance Measures or Licensing, learn more about how Continuous Quality Improvement is embraced by the organization, etc.*
- *Update from Management – could include information sharing about organizational projects and initiatives, staff training updates, pandemic updates, news from the sector, etc. and should include an opportunity for Q & A.*
- *Committee members’ round table – at the direction of the Chair, a “round table” typically affords each member a time-limited opportunity to share information about matter which may be of interest to, and within the scope of, the Committee.*
- *Peer support discussion – (optional) - a time-limited open discussion intended for Committee members to share their experiences with each other, in areas such as: family dynamics and impact to the person served, family members’ coping mechanisms, sharing of success stories, etc. May be preferred at the end of the agenda, with only Committee members present and possibly the staff assistant (at the discretion of the Chair) if minute-taking is expected.*

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Periodic regular agenda items (in a particular month or at a particular frequency) may include:

- *Review and approval of the Committee's Terms of Reference*
- *Election of Officers (Chair, Vice Chair, Treasurer, Secretary) for the Committee*
- *Stakeholder engagement (feedback received by the organization, and actions being taken) – such as for establishing the organization's strategic plan, periodic client and/or family feedback surveys, project-specific feedback*
- *Sharing of results periodic quality and compliance reviews*

Sample "New Business" agenda topics of a more one-time or infrequent nature:

- *Concern about group home staffing levels on long weekends*
- *Question about how and where families or clients may access a particular service or support, and whether offered by the organization or not*
- *Suggestion for an improvement or enhancement to a particular program*
- *Concern about a particular process for function in a program (eg. what disinfecting routines are followed at the Day Program space)*
- *How can the organization support clients and families who are not comfortable with technology, and/or do not have the necessary technology (such as no computer /laptop /tablet, no internet connection, no webcam) to participate in certain programs / services offered by the organization?*
- *Suggestion about communications, websites, newsletters, etc.*

Although the agenda topics brought to the Committee can be varied and broad, it is important to remain within the objectives, commitments and expectations of the Committee within its Terms of Reference.

Do staff of the organization chair the Family Advisory Committee?

An organization may, not must, provide a "staff assistant" to the support the Family Advisory Committee, dependent upon the organization's ability to do so based on resourcing and skill sets. The Committee may invite the staff assistant to attend meetings. The Family Advisory Committee is an autonomous family-led group where the organization's staff may provide a supportive role. As such, Family Advisory Committee meetings generally should be chaired by a family member. A staff assistant may provide supports in areas such as: minute taking, agenda preparation (gathering agenda items, distributing agendas), scheduling / communication of meetings, coordination of learning opportunities for Committee meetings, and more. The staff assistant is a support to, not a member of, the Committee.

The Family Advisory Committee is encouraged to regularly invite one or more member(s) of the organization's management to provide updates and information regarding programs and services, as well as to participate in dialogue with the Committee.

In addition to assigning a Staff Assistant, how can the organization assist in supporting a successful Family Advisory Committee?

In addition to providing a staff assistant, here are some ways that an organization can help interested parties to organize a Family Advisory Committee:

- Provide meeting space and donate refreshments.
- Educate staff and encourage them to help generate interest in the Family Advisory Committee.
- Help to communicate notices (e.g. Information bulletins on the website, include notices in mailings to family members, etc.)
- Dedicate a bulletin board at the organization to the Family Advisory Committee.
- Accept that sometimes family members may choose to meet in private without staff present. Suggest this to them if they have not thought about it or requested it.

Do persons served participate in the Family Advisory Committee?

Experience shows that persons served and family members often have very different needs, interests, and abilities. Family members, who are often quicker and better able to express themselves, may soon dominate discussion at a Committee with representatives from families and persons served. The organization should have various methods of encouraging and receiving input and feedback from its persons served. Family members have a natural relationship with their loved ones (persons served) and are expected to bring a balanced perspective to the Committee table.

Do Family Advisory Committee members act as volunteers of the organization?

Family Advisory Committee participants volunteer their personal time to support Family Advisory Committee activities in an organization. This is not the same as the organization's volunteer program. Individuals who wish to pursue volunteer opportunities in an organization should approach the volunteer coordinator or other contact person. Some individuals may be both a Family Advisory Committee member and a volunteer in the organization. The two roles are related but distinct. The Family Advisory Committee, as noted elsewhere, is an autonomous organized group, whereas volunteers take direction from staff.

Should Family Advisory Committees fundraise?

The purpose of a Family Advisory Committee is not to fundraise. Some Family Advisory Committees choose to engage in fundraising to provide for activities for items above what the organization provides. The Family Advisory Committee should not be raising funds for items that the organization is required to provide. For example, a Family Advisory Committee may wish to provide special treats or activities for persons served

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that are over and above what the organization provides. The Family Advisory Committee may also wish to provide, through fundraising efforts, the persons served with unique or special items or upgrades that are over and above what the organization has been providing.

Wherever fundraising monies are concerned, you need to be very clear about what you want to achieve and how you go about achieving it.