

FAMILY VOICES<sup>®</sup>  
National Center for  
Family♥Professional Partnerships



PROMISING PRACTICES IN CULTURAL COMPETENCE:  
PACER Center (Minnesota)

Since 1977, PACER Center has been a key support for families and children with all disabilities across Minnesota. Staffed primarily by parents of children with disabilities, PACER staff has unique insight into the problems of clients or community members in need. The result is a highly competent advocacy and training center that is able to provide a wide range of services on a variety of topics including early childhood, special education, health care, mental health services, bullying prevention, and support and assistance in maintaining independent living now and in the future.

**MINNESOTA COMMUNITIES**

Although the population of Minnesota is only about 20% non-white, 2015 census data found that the state is rapidly becoming more ethnically and racially diverse. Unfortunately, this same census reported that 4 in 10 African American and Native children and 3 in 10 Hispanic children live in poverty. These numbers suggest a significant number of non-white and in many cases non-English-speaking Minnesotans in need of assistance. In addition to African Americans, Hispanics and a considerable Native community, in recent years Minnesota has seen a substantial increase in immigrants from Laos, China, Vietnam, and Somalia, among others. English is the most commonly spoken language among Minnesotans, followed closely by Spanish and Hmong (Laos, China, and Vietnam).

According to a 2014 report, children between the ages of 5 and 17 make up nearly one quarter of the state's population and roughly 6% of that age group reported at least one disability, which is slightly lower than the national average. Taking all of this into consideration, the staff at PACER Center faces a considerable challenge in negotiating a large and culturally diverse group of consumers.

This brief provides information on how PACER exemplifies promising practices that address important elements of providing culturally competent services. Specifically, a recent application showcased PACER's ability to positively meet the physical, emotional, cultural, and linguistic needs of this group in an office and community setting, while also able to act as an important conduit between families and healthcare providers.

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS:

**Provision of language access:** PACER employs a racially and ethnically diverse staff comprised of members of African American, Hispanic, Somali, Hmong, communities, among others. PACER staff have developed an understanding of cultural differences that extends beyond language, including the ways in which non-Western cultures share and interpret information. They use this knowledge obtained through diverse staff to adapt materials for the specific populations being served. Materials are presented in varying formats to accommodate the needs and challenges of specific consumer populations such as audio recordings for populations who are not literate in their language of origin. This is a tremendous step towards overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers to receiving assistance. Other efforts towards a more robust provision of language access include:

- A comprehensive language access plan that is updated annually, and approved by its Board of Directors, to meet the growing needs of underserved communities.
- Workshops and trainings offered in multiple languages, facilitated by diverse staff and volunteers.
- Phone messages available in English and Spanish, with available connections to other language providers.
- Strong efforts to coordinate with other community providers to ensure that those in need are directed towards the appropriate translation providers.
- Regular evaluations and redesign of brochures and other materials to be more accessible for non-English speaking communities.
- A paid professional staff who demonstrate a commitment to providing accessible, high-quality services.

**Office environments support the diversity of families:** PACER has demonstrated a strong effort to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment. They have a strongly held belief that materials must not only be translated but also adapted for the specific community. An example of material adaptation is what was done for the Somali community. Because Somalis speak in stories, the Somali advocate saw that it would not be useful to produce an adapted written translation, so instead he produced audio files with stories that people could listen to. Additional attention to creating a welcoming environment includes:

- A website that is available in English and Spanish.
- A deliberate effort to reach those in need through ethnically specific media including television, newspapers, and web.
- Hiring racially and ethnically diverse staff that reflects the diversity of larger MN communities.
- Materials made available at a variety of different reading levels to accommodate the varying levels of literacy for English and non-English speaking consumers.
- A considerable amount of visual and print materials have been made available in a number of different languages including Hmong, Spanish, and Somali.
- A variety of linguistically diverse materials sent out to 87 counties and a large number of community providers and partners.
- A clear priority to serve children and families representing all types of diversity, including race, ethnicity, language, income level, gender, and sexual orientation.
- Ensuring photos used in print and online publications reflect Minnesota's diverse communities

**Staff and partnerships reflect diverse populations:** As previously noted, PACER Center has made a considerable effort to build a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse staff that reflects the larger MN community. PACER Center employs a team of culturally and racially diverse community leaders who are highly trained full time employees. These community leaders are not only well connected to other leaders in their communities, but active participants in state advisory councils and task forces serving as true liaisons between the systems of care, government systems and diverse communities. Additionally, PACER

staff uphold and support the belief that while the multi-cultural staff are fluent in the language of the community they serve, they are serving in the role of advocates and therefore should never be asked to be the interpreters.

These efforts, along with their emphasis on increasing access to print and web material, demonstrates an organizational commitment to, and respect for, diverse children and their families.

**Connecting families to other families with shared experiences & similar backgrounds:** Providing training and support to families hoping to develop strong advocacy skills is at the core of PACER Center’s mission. Staff recognize that it is very important to meet families “where they’re at” and to allow the process to move at a pace that is right for them. Special attention is paid to taking the time to build personal relationships with families in order to provide the appropriate and most beneficial services, support, and connections. PACER staff place a considerable emphasis on providing one-to-one support, peer connections, and mentoring in addition to the following:

- Individual case-by-case parent matching to ensure sustainable success.
- Provision of multi-cultural home visitors with whom parents, children, and family are comfortable.
- Community focused workshops that bring together families with similar backgrounds and experiences.
- Openness to new ideas and requests from communities in need.
- Providing workshops and trainings in the community, rather than PACER Center.

**Providing opportunities for diverse families to share their opinions and feedback:** PACER has created an environment that they hope will make children and their families feel welcome and included in the community. Nevertheless, the center and its staff remain open to feedback, requests, and constructive criticism, which they gather in the following ways:

- Program evaluations are made available in different languages to ensure that all voices are represented.
- PACER staff offers one-to-one evaluations for all programs.
- All evaluations are translated to ensure that the needs of each group are met.
- Senior staff is encouraged to form mentoring relationships with new staff, ensuring the continuity of quality and respect for diversity.

## STEPS FOR SUCCESS

- Support the racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity of staff to foster a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere.
- Respect, acknowledge, and utilize the expertise of all staff.
- Expand understandings of “diversity” to include aspects not just related to race or ethnicity, including gender, sexual orientation, and income.
- Rely on the strength and expertise within communities to reach and serve diverse families effectively.
- Conduct training by PACER multi-cultural advocates for all PACER staff and other professionals on working with families from diverse cultures.

## WHAT FAMILIES SAY:

*“PACER staff is very knowledgeable about health care services and has been a great support to our Hmong families. We greatly value your commitment to serving diverse families using culturally and linguistically competent practices. We look forward to working together with you to help Hmong families of children with special health care needs learn more about working with health professionals and accessing and financing needed health care services.” Parent in a Professional role served by PACER*

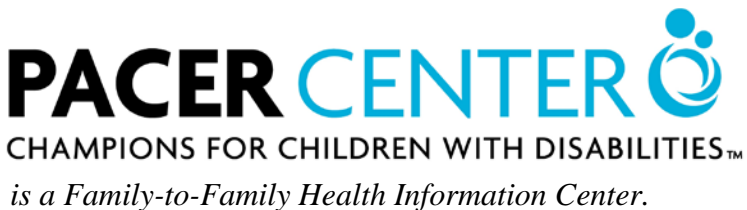
*“Centro has collaborated with PACER staff on many projects. We are aware of the capacity to successfully provide information, resources, individual assistance and training to families and professionals to improve health outcomes for children with special health needs. Having PACER’s staff assist families in a cultural and linguistic competent manner is invaluable to our organization.” Parent in a Professional role served by PACER*

*“In over 30 years of practice in the community and academia, I am not aware of any other organizations which consistently offer the parent-to-parent mentoring and support and community education which PACER Center delivers. There is no doubt that these resources are of great value to families and to those of us in positions to help serve families; and perhaps particularly so for your advocacy and commitment to addressing health disparities among underserved cultures.” Parent in a Professional role served by PACER*

*“I do not know of any other organization in Minnesota that has the knowledge, experience and reputation of PACER, particularly when it comes to dealing with traditionally underserved populations. PACER has been an incredibly valuable community resource for over 30 years. They have an unparalleled reputation for providing exceptional resources and support for families using the parent-to-parent model.” Parent served by PACER*

## CHALLENGES AHEAD/NEXT STEPS

- Ensure that services, programs, information and resources continue to be culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of diverse communities.
- Continue to recruit diverse staff and board members who are reflective of communities served.



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