



# THE BENEFIT OF NEUTRALITY

*Several times throughout the newly released Assessment Center Framework, we reference the importance for Centers to serve as a neutral, unbiased, collaborative hub within their communities. What does this mean and why is it so important? The answer is simple:*

**TRUST.**

Assessment Centers, at their core, serve as a bridge to services and supports matched to the individualized needs and strengths of youth and families. To effectively bridge the connections between youth and families and the agencies and services that can help meet their needs, Centers need to have **trust** from the community. Agencies, service providers, and stakeholders all need to **trust** the Assessment Center is serving the best interests of youth and families by making referrals that are the most appropriate and effective.

When an Assessment Center is also a service provider (especially of ongoing, therapeutic services) there becomes an innate conflict of interest on where those referrals are made. Naturally, service providers are going to look internally to evaluate if services offered by that organization can meet youth and family needs. There may be perceived or actual pressure on staff to make internal services fit the needs of youth and families; even when another community provider may be a better fit. An additional conflict may exist because service providers often have outcomes that are linked to their funding including the number of youth and families they serve. Community partners and stakeholders need to **trust** Assessment Centers are not going to increase their revenue, keep certain cases (e.g., the “easy” cases), or only make referrals to other community partners under certain circumstances.

The physical space and location of an Assessment Center also speaks to **trust**. Centers should be mindful that their location does not create an association they may not desire or one that can impact the **trust** of a youth or family. If a youth or family has had a negative experience with a service provider, yet that service provider oversees bridging that youth and family to community services and support, there is a high likelihood for mistrust and lack of engagement. Additionally, if a Center is co-located in a police station, court, or school system, youth and families may automatically think the Center is the police, court, or school. Mistrust of service providers and systems may inadvertently be associated with the Center and cause youth and families to be reluctant to participate.

**“Neutrality is incredibly important to an Assessment Center’s practice.”**

**– KARLI KEATOR, National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice**

An additional function of an Assessment Center, as laid out in the Framework is to identify community needs. Because Assessment Centers serve as the neutral, collaborative, community hub, they have a unique opportunity to understand the needs of youth and families, the availability of services in the community to meet those needs, and the EFFECTIVENESS of those services. Effectiveness meaning that Centers are connecting youth and families to high quality services that are largely successful in meeting their stated outcomes.

As a society, we have learned to turn to Yelp, Google, or similar sites to see reviews on services (i.e., car repair shops or restaurants) we are seeking. How many stars do they have? What do the reviews say? As the community hub, the Assessment Center maintains that overall directory of community services and supports as well as their quality. A key practice focus for Assessment Centers should be to get feedback from youth and families on the overall quality of service providers and to learn how well those providers engage and address individual needs. This feedback should inform future referrals to that service provider. If Assessment Centers also serve their community as an ongoing service provider, can the community **trust** them to implement this practice to fidelity? The answer is probably not. Would we **trust** Google reviews if it was the staff and owners of the business providing the reviews?

If the core components of the Assessment Centers Framework are implemented correctly, Centers can streamline access to services and supports by serving as a single point of contact for youth and families. They can also understand and communicate youth and family needs and how well the community is meeting those needs. These functions of an Assessment Center are met when Centers ground themselves in neutrality. While the nuance of achieving neutrality is specific to each community, its importance remains. It ensures they have the **trust** of the community and serve in the best interest of youth and families.