It is a long standing practice for adoption and child welfare agencies to offer panels comprised of adopted persons, first/birth parents, and/or adoptive parents, for training, advertising, and fund raising purposes. Ethics of this practice are often under examined if recognized at all. In response to this gap in best practice guidelines the Adoption Policy and Reform Collaborative (APRC) recognizes the following:

Panels

Panels, in adoption and foster care, are selected individuals representing adopted persons, persons currently involved in or previously involved in foster care, first/birth parents (those whom relinquished parental rights either voluntarily or involuntarily), and adoptive parents. A panel’s purpose is to educate prospective and current adoptive parents and families, to provide information for policy reform and funding sources, and to provide advertisement/ endorsement for an agency, business, or clinical practitioner.

Ethics

“Ethics are values that guide our behavior (American Counseling Association, 2005)”. Ethical codes clarify ethical responsibilities, support the organizational mission, establish principals that define behavior, guide practitioners to construct a course of action, and are the basis for processing ethical complaints. The major mental health professional associations, namely, the American Counseling Association, the National Association of Social Workers, the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, and the American Psychological Association, each have respective Codes of Ethics guidelines. Adoption and child welfare agency professional service providers, many of whom have advanced degrees from one of the above mentioned helping professions, should abide by the ethical codes of their profession at all times during the course of practice. This includes during panel selection and implementation.

Unethical Behavior in Panels

The most commonly observed ethical breaches agencies/groups/practitioners make when using panels involve the following: dual relationships, conflicts of interest, confidentiality violations, and using testimonials for advertisement purposes. Ethical violations can be harmful to panelists, who may be current or former clients of the hosting agency/group/practitioner. Moreover ethical violations create liability risk for the hosting agency/group/practitioner that could result in license review, suspension, or removal.

Practice Recommendations

- Careful review of mental health subspecialty ethical guidelines, specifically those that address dual role relationships, conflict of interest, testimonials, and advertising prior to deciding to utilize a panel and before panel participant selection to avoid violations. This should include further review of the endorsement and advertisement of agencies, centers and specific practitioners utilized in the service of the panelist in order to avoid possible violations.
- Panelists should give signed informed consent to participate on a panel. Informed consent, at its most basic, will list the risks and benefits of participation, define expectations of the panelists,
and responsibilities of the hosting agency/group/practitioner. Minor panelists should have legal guardians or parents also giving consent.

- Hosting agencies/group/practitioners should offer pre, during, and post supportive counseling services to panel participants to minimize harm and maximize benefits for the participants.

- Casey Family Programs and the Foster Care Alumni Association of Americas’ joint publication on Strategic Sharing offers best practice guidelines outlining common risks and benefits of panel participation as well as recommendations for preparing panelists (www.casey.org/resources/publications/strategicsharing.htm).

- Panelists should receive a financial honorarium for their panel contribution. Information about reimbursement should also be included in the Informed Consent.

- Hosting agencies/groups/practitioners should create special committees to review ethical guidelines of respective professional associations to determine panel selection and implementation. This committee should be responsible for the panel ethical oversight including selection and administration, reimbursement/honorariums, ensuring there is informed consent, pre, during, and post supportive counseling to participants.