



# Rising to the Challenge

## How Human Services Associations Are Responding to Today's **Shifting Landscape**

Hosted by: Amelia Franck Meyer & Reggie Bicha

### —INTRODUCTION—

Across the country, association leaders are being asked to steady the field while the ground keeps moving. Federal guidance shifts, litigation risk, budget pressure, workforce shortages, and heightened public scrutiny have created a climate where yesterday's "rules of the road" feel uncertain.

Co-hosted by Amelia Franck Meyer (Alia) and Reggie Bicha (American Public Human Services Association), this UnSystem Roundtable convened association executives and policy leads for a confidential, solutions-focused conversation on what's working now—and how associations can help their members adapt without losing the heart of the work.

*This session took place on December 9, 2025.*

### —PARTICIPANTS—

- **Diana Boyer** - Managing Director, County Welfare Directors Association of California
- **Julia Cortina** - Associate Legislative Director, National Association of Counties
- **Maria Gagnon** - Executive Director, New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors
- **Nancy Hafer** - Director, Resource Center for Family-Focused Practice, UC Davis
- **Rachel Mackey** - Senior Associate, Paragon Government Relations. National Association of County Human Services Administrators
- **Janet Reynolds Snyder** - President & CEO, Michigan Federation for Children & Families
- **Reggie Bicha** - President & CEO, American Public Human Services Association – Co-host
- **Amelia Franck Meyer** - Executive Officer, Alia – Co-host

### —KEY INSIGHTS—

#### 1. Language has become challenging: center messaging around efficiency & data

- Members are being pulled in “a thousand different directions” by lawsuits, executive orders, and new regulations described as “drinking from a firehose”—use concise and clear language that’s easily digestible.
- Recognize that messaging alignment is not always possible due to opposing opinions and risk factors like lawsuits, governor statements, and consent decrees. Put together cohorts and affinity groups over forcing joint statements where total agreement is hard to reach.
- Shift external talking points toward efficiency and reducing administrative burdens. Lead with how your ask reduces red tape and improves operations, not with anecdotes—show the time saved and the steps simplified using clear, data-forward explanations.
- Keep Q&A lines open and “sort through the noise” quickly; fast, concise answers matter as rules move.

#### 2. Continue to innovate to create a better future: promote creative solutions that foster hope over fear

- Turn kin practice into a shared playbook: convene cohorts, share resources, and keep the work on the front burner across states.
- Convene multi-state cohorts, align assessments, and route technical assistance where it’s needed most to keep kin culture a priority.
- Use association networks (policy directors, attorneys, FFPSA leads, parent leaders) to spread what’s working to accelerate implementation.
- Partner with those who you’ve established trusting relationships with to chip away at fear and promote approaches that are good for families.
- Resist a mindset of “doom and gloom” and reactivity, instead uplifting proactive approaches like whole-family/2-Gen models and incorporating lived experts. Share results so others can replicate.

### —KEY INSIGHTS—

#### 3. Keep equity and affirming practice alive—even if the website changes

- If public language must soften, keep the real work going in member spaces; adjust the wrapper, not the content, to continue to support you and families from diverse backgrounds.
- We are seeing a necessary shift in public language due to lawsuits and political changes. Keep the internal workgroups, cohorts, and technical assistance going; adjust outward materials, keep the work.
- Take advantage of member-only spaces to say necessary things plainly.

#### 4. It's tough out there; counter executive exhaustion with connection & care

- “People are showing up exhausted. COVID was tough, but it’s worse now.” There is a “weariness” that requires we have a good support system and take care of ourselves.
- Schedule real rooms and peer check-ins on purpose; small rituals of recovery are part of the job, not optional extras.
- Leaders named the role as “lonely,” especially in hybrid settings. Schedule intentional in-person touchpoints for staff and members to restore energy.
- Normalize brief daily grounding routines and peer check-ins so executives can stay regulated while steadying their teams.
- Check in on each other and your members and teams. It can be a scary and lonely time—make sure everyone is okay.
- “Keep showing up and put your game face on—people are suffering.” To do this, lean into self-care strategies, set boundaries, pace yourself, and connect with others as a protective strategy; people are looking to you to see how you react—you have to be regulated to regulate other people, agencies, and systems
- Things are “changing by the day,” so pace yourselves.

## A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO ASSOCIATIONS LEADERS

**You're carrying a lot**—and still moving the work. Every day you translate shifting rules into clear steps, keep kin and whole-family practice on the front burner, and steady people who are tired but still showing up. That matters.

Keep choosing the usable over the loud: one plain page instead of five updates, a checklist instead of a memo, a cohort instead of a broadcast. Name the pressure, sequence the tasks, and keep the doors open for kin, youth, and providers who want to say yes. When language has to soften in public, **keep the substance strong in member spaces**. When legal targets move, give interim guidance now and update fast.

**You don't have to do this alone.** Lean on each other—real rooms, short check-ins, shared artifacts. Progress in this season is built in aligned steps that hold.

### About our Co-Hosts

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**Amelia Franck Meyer** is the Executive Officer of Alia and a nationally recognized leader in child welfare transformation.

**Reggie Bicha, MSW**, is a social worker, administrator, educator, and national leader, currently serving as President & CEO of the American Public Human Services Association.

### About UnSystem Roundtables

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**UnSystem Roundtables** are a new initiative from Alia to bring together child welfare leaders, current and former, who have faced transformational challenges. These invite-only, small group conversations create a confidential space for honest reflection, shared learning, and strategic insight. This is a space for real talk—**not theory, not posturing, but the lived complexity of leading change when the stakes are highest.**

If you would like to participate in a future roundtable, or have a topic you'd like to see discussed, visit: [aliainnovations.org/roundtables](https://aliainnovations.org/roundtables)