



Protecting Families When Fear Runs High

Strategies for **readiness, safety, and trust** under **heightened disruption**

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—INTRODUCTION—

This UnSystem Roundtable convened a small group of human services leaders for a confidential, solutions-focused conversation on preparing agencies, staff, and communities for heightened disruption related to immigration enforcement and detention activity.

A clear message emerged: effective response requires preparation on multiple fronts at once—partner coordination, staff support, practical education, operational readiness, and careful attention to language and confidentiality. Leaders described strategies they used to protect children and families, reduce fear and confusion, and help staff stay grounded and safe while continuing to serve their communities.

—PARTICIPANTS—

Due to the subject matter for this conversation, we've elected to keep participants anonymous. This conversation included high-level leaders from multiple agencies and jurisdictions across the country.

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—KEY INSIGHTS—

1. Stay close to your partners

- Leaders emphasized the importance of staying tightly connected to community partners—especially those with direct visibility into emerging conditions and funding shifts. In several places, partners (notably schools and community organizations) began raising concerns well before impacts were widely felt, giving systems more time to prepare.
- The strongest preparation efforts were not built in isolation—they were built through shared planning with districts and community partners, including coordination on how families could access support safely.
- Partners were also essential for operational readiness. Leaders described reaching out to other counties to borrow tools and protocols (including staff safety materials used in vehicles), and relying heavily on school partners who were able to pivot quickly—supporting at-home learning, coordinating food distribution, and helping families plan when fear kept them from showing up in public spaces.
- In some communities, families responded by relocating quickly to safer areas; where possible, leaders emphasized planning for mobility and helping families understand their options.

2. Create spaces for staff to have safe conversations

- Leaders noted that the workforce impact was significant—and in some cases more personal than operational. Staff were not only supporting families; many were processing fear, grief, anger, uncertainty, and exhaustion in their own lives.
- A key move was creating structured, voluntary spaces for staff to talk safely: a separate time and space where people could be supported without pressure to participate or perform. Sustaining those spaces over time mattered, not just offering them once.
- Leaders also shared that when formal leadership guidance was slow to arrive, teams mobilized locally. Supervisors began scheduling time to “hold space”—a place employees could simply show up, ask questions, speak freely, or just be. In settings where staff held different political views, leaders had to name and challenge internal judgment, reminding teams that people of all identities are allowed to have feelings about being impacted and afraid.
- Some systems also leaned into Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) or affinity spaces (race, identity, role-based groups) to help staff grieve, process, and feel less alone.

3. Education. Education. Education.

- Repeated “know your rights” training surfaced as a cornerstone practice—both for staff readiness and to help families understand what to do in high-stress moments. Leaders shared that this cannot be one-and-done; it needs to be repeated as conditions shift and new staff join.
- Education extended beyond “know your rights.” Leaders described advance planning trainings for families, including Delegation of Parental Authority (DOPA), standby guardianships, and basic legal planning (e.g., who can pick up a child, who can make decisions, and what documentation is needed). Several noted they were slower than they wanted to be in understanding what information could be shared and how to communicate it safely—reinforcing the need to clarify legal guidance early and repeat it often.
- Several leaders also described practical tools that made training actionable in real life—materials on hand, staff scripts, and scenario practice so teams could respond calmly rather than improvise.
- Some leaders also encouraged families and staff to plan for practical continuity: memorize key numbers (lawyers, close supports), ensure medications are filled in advance, and keep essential items accessible.

**Red cards are free, physical, or digital cards developed by the Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC) that help immigrants assert their U.S. constitutional rights when encountering law enforcement or ICE agents.*

4. Plan for the worst, hope for the best

- Leaders described internal preparation not as fear-mongering, but as duty of care—planning so staff and families are safer if something happens, while hoping it won’t. Operational readiness included office layout and privacy changes, clear protocols, scenario training, and a defined chain of response (including who speaks, who documents, and who supports).
- Leaders also implemented staff safety protocols beyond the office. Some counties created visible placards for staff vehicles (“on official county business”) as a short-term protective measure, and clarified what staff should do if stopped or approached while in the field. One leader described calling the 911 center directly to confirm whether employees could call for help if they felt unsafe; dispatch agreed to respond if staff identified themselves as being on official county business and needing assistance.
- The most effective preparations were concrete and practiced: checklists staff could read under stress, clarity on what to look for in documentation, and consistent internal drills that reduced panic and confusion.
- Several also emphasized that anything shared internally or externally about surge response may later be subject to retention requirements—reinforcing the importance of clarity about documentation, recordkeeping, and what must be preserved.

5. Adjust service delivery to protect confidentiality and access

- Leaders shared that families who needed help were not always willing—or able—to share names, addresses, or attend public events. A core lesson: if services require families to expose identifying information, many families will not access them.
- Leaders noted that in some cases, families would not share names, addresses, or other identifying details. Systems adapted by using intermediaries (especially schools) to distribute resources, and by shifting delivery models so families could still receive essentials without entering public spaces or leaving a paper trail. Some communities organized “food trains” and supply stock-ups that allowed families to remain home when risk felt highest.
- Systems adapted by changing the delivery method: moving events fully virtual when needed, distributing supplies through trusted intermediaries (such as school districts), and designing supports that could be received without forcing families to take risks.

6. Think carefully about the language

- Leaders emphasized that language choices matter—both for protecting families and staff and for staying aligned with legal requirements and organizational constraints. Some described the topic as polarizing, requiring careful internal communication that stayed practical and grounded.
- Leaders described receiving official directives about what could and could not be said, sometimes through a centralized response team inbox where questions were submitted and answered. However, they also noted gaps: questions from foster parents, vendors, and community partners often required faster guidance than legal or leadership teams could provide. Some attorneys held boundaries (“we can’t tell others what to do”), which made it even more important to prepare general guidance and resource pathways in advance.
- Leaders found it helpful to focus on “what to do if…” guidance, clearly naming boundaries (what the agency can and cannot do), and offering opt-in spaces for discussion rather than broad messaging that could increase risk or misunderstanding.
- Leaders emphasized the importance of clarifying “on-duty versus off-duty” roles: being explicit about when staff are representing the county and when they are acting as private citizens helped teams navigate boundaries without silencing legitimate fear.

7. Prepare for during and after, not just the moment

- Leaders noted that disruption does not end when visibility decreases. They emphasized thinking in phases: what you do before and after is just as important as what you do during. Several described the need for follow-up support because even when the moment “passes,” it continues to affect staff and communities.
- Leaders also shared an unexpected learning: in some communities, there was not an influx of calls for government support—because neighbors and community networks stepped up quickly. Support tended to show up most where relationships already existed. This reinforced the importance of relationship-building before crisis and sustaining community infrastructure after it.

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO ASSOCIATIONS LEADERS

To every leader holding this work in your community: we see you. You are navigating real fear and real uncertainty—while still showing up to protect children, support families, and steady your teams. The decisions you're making are not theoretical. They are human. And the weight of them is real.

Preparation is not panic. It is care. Creating safe space for staff, building practical checklists, strengthening partner coordination, and protecting confidentiality are all ways of saying: we will not leave families alone in the chaos.

And we also want to name this: what happens during the moment is only part of the story. What you do before and after matters just as much. Even when the immediate surge passes, the impact can linger—for staff, families, and communities. Following up, checking in, and continuing to hold space is part of the work, too.

You are not alone in this. There are peers across the country learning the same lessons, making the same hard calls, and trying to do right by their people. Your leadership—especially in moments like these—matters more than you may ever know.

About UnSystem Roundtables

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