



From **Crisis** to Transformation: Driving Meaningful Change Amid Chaos and Uncertainty

Hosted by: Amelia Franck Meyer & Christine Norbut Beyer

—INTRODUCTION—

The inaugural UnSystem Roundtable took place on May 22, 2025, under the theme “**From Crisis to Transformation: Driving Meaningful Change Amid Chaos and Uncertainty.**” Co-hosted by Amelia Franck Meyer (Alia) and Commissioner Christine Norbut Beyer (New Jersey Department of Children and Families), the session featured seasoned leaders from across the country who have weathered public scrutiny, lawsuits, budget crises, and tragic losses—yet remained committed to transforming systems for children and families.

A clear and resounding message emerged: transformation is possible—even amid chaos—but it demands **values-based leadership, deep self-awareness, and a commitment to transparency over perfection.** Leaders must be grounded in their “why,” supported by trusted relationships, and willing to speak hard truths, even when it’s unpopular or painful. The session surfaced powerful shared truths and practical insights, which we now offer publicly in support of other system leaders walking similar paths.

—PARTICIPANTS—

- **Daniel Little** – Social Services Agency Director, County of Santa Clara, CA
- **Deborah Shropshire** – Former Director, Oklahoma Human Services
- **Mike Leach** – Former Director, South Carolina DSS; Advocate and Consultant
- **Danny Morris** – Deputy Director, Sacramento County, CA
- **Kate Luster** – Director, Rock County Human Services, WI
- **Fariborz Pakseresht** – Director, Oregon Department of Human Services
- **Amelia Franck Meyer** – Executive Officer, Alia (*Co-Host*)
- **Christine Norbut Beyer** – Commissioner, NJ Department of Children and Families (*Co-Host*)



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—KEY INSIGHTS—

1. Ground Yourself in Your “Why”

- In times of chaos, leaders must return to their core motivation. Knowing “why” you lead helps sustain you—and your teams—through criticism, burnout, and uncertainty.
- Several leaders cited their connection to specific families or community efforts as the anchor that kept them going.

2. Proactively Share Success Stories

- Media attention often focuses on tragic outcomes. Leaders stressed the importance of sharing wins, showcasing progress, and lifting up stories of transformation—especially to elected officials and communities.

3. Lead with Values, Not Fear

- Attempts to appease vocal critics or political bullies rarely work. Leaders who stayed true to their values—even under pressure—ultimately earned trust and credibility.
- “Standing in your values” was described as both a survival tactic and a strategy for transformational leadership.

4. Prioritize Staff Care and Culture

- Agencies that invested in staff well-being saw dramatic improvements: lower turnover, better caseloads, and stronger outcomes.
- Compassionate leadership during COVID and crises helped retain talent and build loyalty.

5. Transparency as a Cornerstone for Collaboration

- Leaders consistently heard calls for collaboration—but realized what stakeholders truly wanted was transparency.
- Sharing data, decision-making processes, and strategic plans built trust and defused opposition.
- Proactively communicating “why” decisions are made (especially cuts or shifts in programming) prevented backlash and fostered shared ownership.

6. Build Coalitions Before You Need Them

- Stakeholder engagement isn’t a crisis response—it’s a proactive strategy. Leaders who built strong coalitions in advance found those allies stood with them during hard times.
- “Bringing others along” was key to preventing regressions to the status quo following public criticism or high-profile tragedies.

7. Criticism Can Become Contribution

- Leaders share that some of their fiercest critics later became nonprofit partners or solution-oriented allies.
- There’s opportunity in reframing criticism as energy that, if channeled correctly, can help transform the future.

8. Sustainable Leadership Requires Boundaries

- Nearly all participants acknowledged personal tolls—burnout, health issues, and family sacrifice.
- Sustainable leadership includes setting boundaries, prioritizing self-care, and cultivating teams that share the load.

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO SYSTEM LEADERS

To every leader navigating the relentless challenges of child welfare reform: **you are not alone.**

This work is heavy, and it can be isolating. But around the country, there are peers who understand—who have walked the fire and come out stronger, clearer, and more committed than ever.

Let this serve as a reminder: you can lead boldly without losing yourself. You can protect your teams while pushing for change. You can stay grounded in your values and still move systems.

We see you.

We honor your leadership.

And we are here to walk this path with you.

- *Daniel, Deb, Mike, Danny, Kate, Fariborz, Amelia, and Christine.*

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