What Do We Do With "Unplaceable" Kids?

Hosted by: Amelia Franck Meyer & Erica Bañuelos

—INTRODUCTION—

The rise in youth for whom we cannot identify an appropriate placement is not a niche problem—it's a signal that our systems are misaligned with what children need. Hoteling, office stays, and detention-as-default are symptoms of deeper gaps in placement fit, support, and cross-system coordination—not a lack of care or commitment from those doing the work.

Co-hosted by Amelia Franck Meyer (Alia) and Erica Bañuelos (Texas DFPS), this roundtable convened system leaders for a confidential, solutions-focused conversation on what is working now—and what it will take to move from crisis-driven placements to belonging, stability, and healing.

Leaders shared how their jurisdictions are reducing hoteling and building stability by (1) increasing accountability with daily case reviews, (2) changing language and expectations, (3) moving to kin-first care with intensive wraparound, (4) standing up rapid, multidisciplinary decision cycles, and (5) clarifying cross-system responsibilities so child welfare isn't the only responder. In one example provided, a state drove hoteling from 200 nightly unplaced youth in 2021 to only 12 as recently as November 2025. Others who followed and implemented these approaches experienced similar success.

This UnSystem Roundtable took place on December 2, 2025.

—PARTICIPANTS—

- **Anne Nava —** Social Worker Supervisor, Family & Children's Services, Mendocino County, CA
- **Cristian Garcia —** President, Texas, Saint Francis Ministries.
- **Ruthie Cherry —** Senior Director of Permanency, Our Community Our Kids, Texas.
- **Kari Daggett —** Division Director, Child, Adult, and Family Services; Adams County Human Services Department
- **Leigh Wahlen —** Director, Department of Children & Families (Community Services Division), Polk County, Wisconsin.
- **John Elliott —** Administrator, Division of Safety & Permanence, Wisconsin Department of Children & Families.
- **Shimekia Covell —** Supervisor, Baltimore City Department of Social Services, Maryland
- **Erica Bañuelos —** Associate Commissioner, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. *(co-host)*
- **Amelia Franck Meyer —** Executive Officer, Alia. *(co-host)*

—HOSTS—

Erica Bañuelos began her career with Child Protective Services (CPS) in June 1997 as a caseworker and has since built over 28 years of dedicated service in child welfare. She has served in numerous leadership roles, including Supervisor, Program Director, Program Administrator, Regional Director, and CPS Director of Field. Her broad experience spans investigations, family safety services, adoption, and conservatorship. She now serves as the CPS Associate Commissioner, where she leads with a strong commitment to improving outcomes for children and families.

Ms. Bañuelos earned her Bachelor of Arts in Human Services from Our Lady of the Lake University and, in 2002, completed her Master's in Social Work. She is also a Licensed Child Care Administrator. Throughout her career, she has been recognized for her unwavering advocacy and leadership in child protection.

Beyond her professional work, Ms. Bañuelos is most proud of being a mother of two amazing boys, who inspire her passion and dedication every day.

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

UnSystem ROUNDTABLES
HOSTED BY ALIA

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—KEY INSIGHTS—

1. Language sets the bar—raise it.

- Words matter. Using the wrong language will lower expectations and normalize workarounds that harm kids and exhaust staff.
- Replace negative and passive language with positive, clear, action-oriented language. For example, instead of "unplaceable child" try "a child with unmet needs."
- When teams stop labeling children as the problem, they redirect energy toward fitting supports and shared accountability for a stable match.

2. Pathways to placement beat one-off searches.

- Chasing a bed produces churn. Jurisdictions that built a pathway —early risk identification, daily multidisciplinary huddles, and proper accountability mechanisms—moved faster and placed better.
- A standard rhythm keeps youth visible every day, aligns helpers, and catches risks to placement stability early so the first safe fit can become the lasting fit.

3. Make kin-first the default—and brief and support kin-like partners.

- Family-finding belongs at the front of the line, not after options are exhausted.
- Short term weekend placements ("trial stays") paired with active support and follow-through can open doors and break down barriers for kin.
- Don't assume relatives "already know." Share the full picture—history, risks, triggers, court expectations, school plan, and a simple safety plan. Informed kin placements last because relatives can plan, not guess.

4. Skill up supports: stability comes from capability, not capacity.

- More beds don't fix mismatches. What holds placements is properly equipped and supported caregivers: this includes coaching, 24/7 support lines, respite opportunities, flexible stabilization funds for concrete needs, and clinical consults, supervised by trained and resourced case managers carrying low-ratio case loads.
- Prioritize training up your caregivers over finding new ones with a needle-in-a-haystack skillset. As one leader said, "We're not chasing more beds; we're building more skill [in our providers to help them manage more complex behaviors]."

5. Ask families "What would it take?" and use the answer as a roadmap.

- A simple question—"What would it take for you to maintain this child?"—will provide valuable insight to the barriers families are facing that prevent them from providing care. Provide resources to reduce barriers to stability.
- When systems pair that question with tangible follow-through (short-term kinship stabilization, quick access to resources, a direct line for rapid help, and systems accountability), families say yes sooner and sustain the placement longer.

6. Elevate youth voice; humanize every decision.

- Keeping youth present—show their photos to huddles, provide short video introductions, direct check-ins—shifts tone and choices from risk-sorting to relationship building.
- When teams can "see" the youth, matching improves, providers are more willing to say yes, and preservation efforts are more targeted.
- Belonging is easier to design for when the person is not abstract.

Turn the page for more...

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—KEY INSIGHTS (CONT.)—

7. Village the work—one community map, many doors.

- Hotel stays and detention-as-default are signals of missing pathways, not "difficult-to-place kids."
- Counties that mapped after-hours options (mobile crisis, youth stabilization, respite/host homes, non-congregate care, Family Resource Centers) and set clear processes for who answers which need in real time dramatically reduced office stays and "nowhere to go" nights.
- Co-planning and training with law enforcement replaced unnecessary holds with planned responses.

8. Partner early and often with providers to co-own success.

- A referral isn't a relationship. Leaders who called providers with, "How can we support you to say yes and succeed?" removed barriers quicker and preserved placements longer.
- Formalize the cadence with shared data, rapid-response huddles, and properly trained and resourced staff.
- When success is co-owned, problem-solving happens before the breakdown, not after.

9. Measure what matters and share the wins.

- Track leading indicators (time to first fit, kin placement rate, hotel/office nights avoided) and stability; add qualitative notes from caregivers and youth.
- Share results in weekly huddles to fuel learning and spread what's working. Data used for improvement—not blame—builds momentum and credibility for scaling.

Five Practical Moves You Can Make Right Now

- **Humanize your language** in written and verbal practice; replace clinical terms with positive, clear, action-oriented language linked to a Pathway to Placement protocol.
- **Stand up a daily huddle** for youth at risk of disruption or without placements; add a 24/7 caregiver support line.
- **Adopt the "What would it take?" question** with kin: "What would it take for you to maintain this child?" Fund the top three asks.
- **Map your community pathway** and resources for after-hours: name the doors and options available and ensure proper staffing and hours for key points of contact.
- **Bring providers in early**—set a monthly "what would help you say yes?" roundtable; communicate success to build support and momentum.

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO SYSTEM LEADERS

We see you. We know you worry about these youth, all of them, but especially ones in need of stable places to grow up—the ones that wake you up at 3 a.m., the ones where the options feel thin, and the stakes are everything. If you're reading this, it's because you care enough to keep looking for a better way.

There is no such thing as an "unplaceable" child. There are children with unmet needs and systems still learning how to meet them. What you're building—kin-first pathways, quick-turn huddles, preservation supports, community doors that stay open after hours—is proof that progress is possible, even now.

Keep the work human. Lead with belonging and clarity, pair compassion with structure, and share the load between partners who can say "yes" together. Change rarely arrives in a single win; it comes in aligned steps, owned across your teams and communities. You are not alone in this work.

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*