



## Family Stability in the Era of Budget Cuts

### How do we build supports as demand rises without expanding the system?

Hosted by: Dr. Amelia Franck Meyer

#### —INTRODUCTION—

Human services leaders are being asked to respond to rising family needs while many of the supports that help prevent crisis are under increasing financial pressure. The tension is significant: as families experience greater stress from housing instability, food insecurity, childcare costs, reduced benefits, and other economic pressures, reports to child welfare can rise at the same time that prevention and community resources become harder to sustain.

This UnSystem Roundtable asked a practical question: **How do we build supports as demand rises—without expanding the system?** Hosted by Amelia Franck Meyer of Alia, the confidential conversation brought together public and private child welfare leaders from several jurisdictions to share what they are doing now to strengthen prevention, reduce unnecessary system involvement, support kin and families, and make better use of increasingly constrained resources.

A clear theme emerged: **doing more with less cannot simply mean asking the same system to absorb more work with fewer people.** Leaders are reconsidering where work happens, who does it, what families actually need, and which parts of the traditional child welfare response may no longer be the best use of limited resources. The goal is not a smaller system for its own sake. It is a more precise system—one that reserves formal intervention for true safety concerns while moving support earlier, closer to families, and into places where families can access it without first entering child welfare.

*This UnSystem Roundtable took place on August 20, 2026.*

**—KEY INSIGHTS—****1. Keep the north star simple: children are safest when their parents have what they need to keep them safe**

Budget pressure can quickly turn leadership conversations toward positions, contracts, caseloads, and what has to be cut. Leaders repeatedly returned to a more foundational question: What do children and families need in order to remain safely together?

A phrase often used at Alia made it's way into the conversation: "Children are safest when their parents have what they need to keep them safe." That framing changes the starting point. Instead of asking how the system can absorb more reports or cases, ask what would reduce the need for formal intervention in the first place. Food, housing, behavioral health treatment, recovery support, childcare, transportation, and relational support are not separate from child safety; for many families, they are part of what makes safety sustainable.

In an era of shrinking resources, this north star can help leaders distinguish between cuts that create efficiency and cuts that simply move cost and crisis downstream.

**2. Narrow the front door: families can be supported before they are reported**

More reports do not automatically mean more safety. One jurisdiction described a multi-year effort to transform mandated reporting by helping schools, service providers, 211 staff, and other community partners distinguish between concerns that require child protective intervention and needs that can be addressed through support.

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The shift was described simply: move from “see something, say something” toward “families can be supported before they are reported.” The jurisdiction reported that, after implementing this approach, referrals declined by about 15% and investigations fell from 4,857 to 3,760, while substantiations increased. Leaders interpreted that combination as greater precision: fewer unnecessary investigations, with more attention available for reports that were more likely to reflect genuine safety concerns.

The conversation also surfaced an important implementation lesson. A structured decision-making tool created to help mandated reporters was cumbersome, difficult to integrate with the state information system, and raised liability concerns for reporters. The idea of adding structure to decision-making remained valuable, but the experience reinforced that a good concept can fail if the workflow is too difficult to use. Reform has to work in practice, not only in policy.

### **3. Build a direct path from concern to concrete support**

Reducing reports only works if there is somewhere else for families to go. Leaders emphasized that transforming the front door requires strong community pathways that connect families to real help quickly.

One emerging model discussed during the roundtable routes callers with poverty-related concerns directly to 211, where specially trained staff can help determine whether the concern belongs in child welfare or whether the family could instead benefit from concrete supports. Those supports may be as practical as help with a utility bill, first month’s rent, or restoring phone service. The goal is not to divert legitimate safety concerns; it is to stop using a child welfare investigation as the gateway to assistance when the presenting need is poverty-related.

The larger lesson is that prevention needs an operational pathway, not simply a philosophy. If leaders want fewer families entering child welfare, communities need a clear, trusted place where families and mandated reporters can turn for help before a crisis becomes a report.

## 4. Kin-first only works when support follows the placement

Several leaders described significant progress in identifying relatives and kin-like caregivers quickly. Licensing rules have become more flexible in some jurisdictions, and agencies are increasingly treating kin as the first placement option when children cannot safely remain at home. But the conversation made an important distinction: finding kin is not the same as sustaining kin.

One jurisdiction reported that roughly 75% of initial removals were placed with kin, while only about 48% of children in care at a point in time remained in kinship placements. Leaders saw the gap as a reminder that systems can become very good at locating relatives without becoming equally good at helping those relatives succeed over time.

Supports described in the conversation included proactive outreach to kin caregivers, services that do not depend on becoming a licensed foster parent, 24/7 assistance, practical caregiving help, flexible levels of service, and ongoing family search and engagement. Leaders also stressed the importance of keeping the broader family network connected even after one relative accepts placement. If that placement struggles, the system should not have to begin family finding from zero.

Kin-first is therefore not simply a placement strategy. It requires an ongoing support strategy built around the question: What would it take for this family to do this successfully?

## 5. Repurpose the workforce toward the work you want more of

Budget cuts often lead first to vacancies, layoffs, or simply distributing more work across fewer staff. This conversation surfaced another option: before eliminating capacity, examine whether existing roles can be redirected toward the work the system is trying to grow.

Leaders described cross-training staff, mixing caseloads, and allowing the same worker to scale services up or down as a family's needs change. That approach reduced duplicate intakes and handoffs, made on-call coverage more flexible, and allowed support to change more quickly without introducing a new worker every time the service level changed.

Other jurisdictions are repurposing foster-care licensing roles toward family finding, kin engagement, and ongoing caregiver support. One state brought relative and kinship support in-house in part as a budget strategy and created new pathways for existing employees who wanted to move out of traditional case management while remaining in public service.

These shifts are not consequence-free. Changes in public contracting can create real financial impacts for provider organizations, and leaders noted the need to think with providers about what services communities will need next. But the larger insight was clear: when the model changes, the workforce structure should change with it. Maintaining every role exactly as it existed under a more removal-centered system can consume resources that could instead be moved toward prevention, permanency, and family support.

## 6. Think carefully about the language

Some of the most consequential supports discussed in the roundtable were also the least complicated: groceries, a car repair, a security deposit, several months of rent, transportation, or another immediate expense that determines whether a family can safely care for a child.

One leader described aggressively building flexible community funding that could be used when traditional funding streams were too restrictive. The question was not, “Which program does this family qualify for?” but, “What would it take for this family to do this?” That flexibility can be especially important for kin caregivers who may be willing to take children but are suddenly facing expenses their household was never designed to absorb.

The conversation also challenged the assumption that every prevention function requires a highly credentialed clinical workforce. Parent partners and people with lived expertise were described as especially powerful in relational work with families—both because of what they know and because they can often build trust in ways that feel different from relationships with people who hold investigative or removal authority.

When resources are tight, concrete support and lived expertise are not lesser forms of intervention. They can be some of the most direct ways to reduce family stress before it becomes a safety crisis.

## 7. Realign the funding with the desired outcomes

A persistent tension surfaced throughout the conversation: child welfare financing has historically been built around formal system involvement and out-of-home care. As jurisdictions successfully reduce entries into care, they can simultaneously reduce the reimbursement that has helped sustain the infrastructure around the system.

That creates a difficult transition. Leaders may be producing the outcomes the field says it wants—fewer removals, more kinship, faster permanency, stronger prevention—while finding that their financial structure still rewards the older model.

The discussion called for leaders to make this contradiction visible to county boards, legislatures, federal partners, and other decision-makers. It also called for internal honesty about where money and staffing are currently located. If fewer investigations are needed, can some investigative capacity move toward prevention or permanency? If fewer traditional foster homes are needed, can recruitment staff become family-finding and kin-support staff? If keeping a family together costs less than removing a child, can flexible resources be moved earlier rather than waiting to fund a more expensive intervention later?

One example shared during the discussion described a jurisdiction that reduced the number of children in care by approximately 60% over four years while maintaining or improving safety outcomes. As the workload changed, the jurisdiction was also able to reduce staffing needs and reported unusually strong workforce retention. The lesson was not that every jurisdiction should simply cut staff. It was that when the work changes substantially, leaders have an opportunity to redesign the infrastructure around the outcomes they are actually trying to achieve.

## A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO ASSOCIATIONS LEADERS

### **This is not business as usual.**

You are being asked to hold today's system together while building the one families need next. You are making budget decisions, managing workforce pressure, responding to immediate safety concerns, and at the same time trying to move people, dollars, and authority toward prevention, kinship, permanency, and support. That is not simply management. It is rebuilding.

Our conversation offered an important reminder: shrinking resources do not have to automatically mean expanding intervention. Leaders are finding ways to reduce unnecessary demand, make reporting more precise, strengthen kin, use concrete supports earlier, and repurpose people toward the work that keeps families safely together.

Keep the north star visible: children are safest when their parents have what they need to keep them safe. Ask what families need before asking which system response they qualify for. Move resources toward the outcomes you want more of. And give yourself permission to reconsider structures that were built for a different model of child welfare.

You are not simply doing more with less. At your best, you are deciding what should be done differently—and building toward it.

## Roundtable Participants

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**Nicholas Stabenow-Schneider:** Family Services Manager - Permanency Programs-  
Eau Claire County Dept. of Human Services (WI)

**Jon Rylaarsdam:** Executive Director, YouthNet (WA)

**Randall Muth:** Lucas County Children Services, (OH)

**Angela Miles:** Nebraska DHHS (NE)

**Amelia Franck Meyer:** Executive Officer, Alia

## 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)

