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LESSONS IN SYSTEM REDESIGN:
Alia UnSystem Innovation Cohort
2018-2021

Alia UnSystem Innovation Cohort 2018–2021

August 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

From March 2018 through March 2021 Alia convened the UnSystem Innovation Cohort, a group of child welfare leaders plus wisdom guides with professional and lived expertise. The Cohort developed as a result of a 2017 human-centered design event in Minnesota called Ten of Ten for Kids, facilitated by design pioneers IDEO and hosted by Alia.

The 100+ designers at Ten of Ten came from across the country representing a multitude of child welfare stakeholders and were tasked with redesigning a child welfare system that works for kids and families. However, they did *not* design a new system, but rather developed prototypes for community supports because as we realized, the perfect child welfare system already exists: *families*.

As a foundation for how public systems can build supports around families when challenges arise, a set of Guiding Principles[1] was created. These Guiding Principles represent an approach involving an undoing of our current structure; therefore, we call it an UnSystem. Alia assembled a cohort of committed and courageous public child welfare system leaders, and guides full of professional wisdom and personal experience with the system to turn UnSystem principles into action.

The Alia UnSystem Innovation Cohort committed to operationalizing the Guiding Principles in their agencies, places where *"Family connections are always preserved and strengthened."*

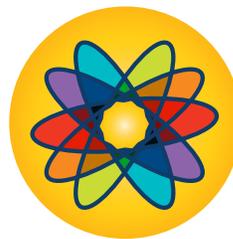1 Appendix A: Full description of UnSystem Guiding Principles

UnSystem Guiding Principles

PROTECT RELATIONAL CONNECTIONS AS SACRED

NUTURE THE CAPACITY FOR JOY

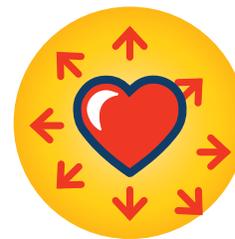**INSIST ON RACIAL EQUITY AND RADICAL INCLUSION**

DARE TO SHARE POWER

COMMIT TO INTERGENERATIONAL WELLBEING

TRUST THE WISDOM OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES TO DESIGN THEIR OWN FUTURES

DO WHAT LOVE WOULD DO

It took the group from March 2018 to September 2018 to organize around this shared aspiration and build the foundational trust to move forward. Alia published a case study describing the Cohort development and each of the five jurisdictions in more detail: Alia UnSystem Innovation Cohort: Family Connections are Always Preserved and Strengthened – Case Studies and Early Data.

Stage-setting moved to practice in fall 2018 and we put the Change Framework to action. The second published Cohort report, "Building an UnSystem: A Child Welfare Leader's Guide to Transformation, YEAR ONE Practice Report," captures the Cohort experience from fall 2018 through fall 2019 and was published in March 2020. Reference this case study for straightforward advice and practical tips you can employ immediately in your own change efforts.

We have learned a tremendous amount from this Cohort experience, even more which has yet to be revealed. In this case study, you will read many lessons learned over the past three years, how the Cohort time was spent, and culminating data outcomes. Capturing data (qualitative and/or quantitative) from different angles helps us learn where the change process is most effective for different stakeholders – Cohort members, agency staff, children and families, and the community. We looked for signals of success in several different places:

- How did the *Cohort members* experience the Cohort process? In continuous conversation and in two administered surveys (February 2020 and March 2021), Alia learned what was most helpful from the Cohort process. (pages 20-21)

- How did *agency staff and managers* experience Cohort-related work in their agencies? Focus groups and an Alia-facilitated series of supervisor calls helped us understand how agency employees with secondary and tertiary engagement in the Cohort experienced the changes. (pages 23-25)

- How did the lives of *children and families* change because of Cohort-related work? Most importantly, are the children and families in the Cohort agency communities better off? To measure progress, we captured jurisdictional outcome data over 36 months (4/1/18 – 3/31/21). (pages 6, 39-46)

- How were *communities* changed because of Cohort-inspired work? How might we measure this accurately? Where might we go for signals? These questions solicit more subsequent questions than answers; however, we are developing materials to assist systems in becoming more trusted partners to allow for meaningful community partnerships.

The goal of this case study is to share the experience of the committed, tenacious Cohort members, their teams, supporters, and communities. We share our processes, outcomes, praise, and criticism with transparency so that others may replicate our successes or avoid the pain of our missteps. Our deep desire and organizational mission is to shift child- and family-serving agencies toward practice that promotes connection and justice so that kids can stay safely *with* their families, not be kept *from* them.

We offer our experience freely to you in these materials and hope that it might offer confirmation, ignition, challenge, or warning as you, too, move beyond the theoretical and build *your* UnSystem.

Introduction

2. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Child and family-serving systems in our country are in need of an overhaul and that change work is so tough. To the directors, supervisors, and frontline workers – those of you working to lead, manage, and implement the systems change – our awe and gratitude are unending. We recognize the tremendous effort it takes to remain a committed changemaker while being mired in a system that does not always promote loving connection and where supporting the wisdom of families often feels contrary to the compliance-based systems we live in. KEEP GOING.

The group of Cohort guides who added professional love and insight to the process truly reflect lifetimes of wisdom. Perhaps more than anyone in the Cohort, you all were asked to bring your whole selves to the experience, and it made a huge difference. We needed your guidance, inquiry, affirmation, national and ultra-local perspectives. Most importantly, we needed your life experience – personal and professional, if that's even a real distinction – and you gave it freely. THANK YOU FOR THE GIFT OF *YOU*.

Evaluating and analyzing work without a roadmap requires being comfortable with not knowing, prepared to record and organize insights only as they are revealed. We were lucky to have skilled evaluators at our side. Dr. Laurel Bidwell guided the Cohort evaluation when the Cohort was just an idea. Nick Metcalf came to us in the exact moment we needed to keep us focused on capturing our process. With both art and science, they were able to help us sift through the work to find and organize the gems that were already there. Thank you both for your patience, creativity, and encouragement. HEAPS OF THANKS.
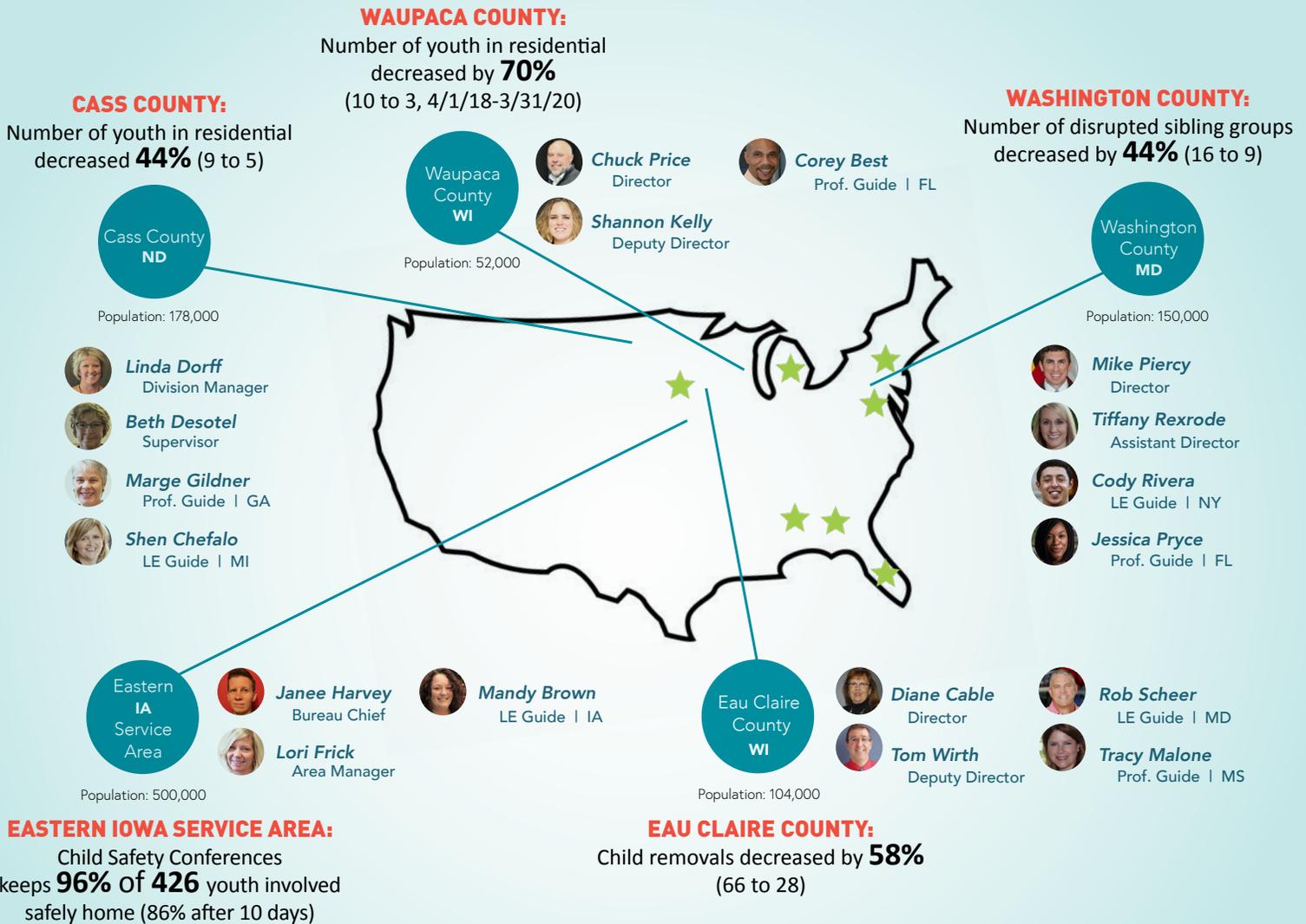
There is no better all-in-one team member than the Cohort Project Manager, Dr. beth triplett. From booking flights to finding the perfect metaphor, there is nary a detail that goes untended under her caring and watchful eye. We rest easy knowing you will figure out and deliver the best solution for the widest variety of challenges. You can truly do it all. WITH AWE AND GRATITUDE.

Finally, to every child and adult whose lives have been affected by the child welfare system – your fortitude is unmatched. You jump through hoops despite the grief, hardship, separation, and/or injustice you have experienced. Our goal is to invest resources into communities so that you can support your own families in the ways you know best; every moment of our work is inspired by and dedicated to you. UNTIL ALL YOUTH ARE SAFELY HOME.

3. AT-A-GLANCE
Alia UnSystem Innovation Cohort

WAUPACA COUNTY:
Number of youth in residential decreased by **70%**
(10 to 3, 4/1/18-3/31/20)

CASS COUNTY:
Number of youth in residential decreased **44%** (9 to 5)

WASHINGTON COUNTY:
Number of disrupted sibling groups decreased by **44%** (16 to 9)

Waupaca County
WI
Population: 52,000

Chuck Price
Director

Corey Best
Prof. Guide | FL

Shannon Kelly
Deputy Director

Cass County
ND
Population: 178,000

Washington County
MD
Population: 150,000

Linda Dorff
Division Manager

Beth Desotel
Supervisor

Marge Gildner
Prof. Guide | GA

Shen Chefalo
LE Guide | MI

Mike Piercy
Director

Tiffany Rexrode
Assistant Director

Cody Rivera
LE Guide | NY

Jessica Pryce
Prof. Guide | FL

Eastern
IA
Service
Area
Population: 500,000

Janee Harvey
Bureau Chief

Lori Frick
Area Manager

Mandy Brown
LE Guide | IA

Eau Claire County
WI
Population: 104,000

Diane Cable
Director

Tom Wirth
Deputy Director

Rob Scheer
LE Guide | MD

Tracy Malone
Prof. Guide | MS

EASTERN IOWA SERVICE AREA:
Child Safety Conferences keeps **96%** of **426** youth involved safely home (86% after 10 days)

EAU CLAIRE COUNTY:
Child removals decreased by **58%**
(66 to 28)

Former guides:
Lien Bragg, Ashley McCullough, Franco Vega, Brian Clapier, China Darrington, Margo Kemp Johnson

Former leaders:
Tom Wirth, Mike Piercy, Chip Ammerman, Beth DeSotel, Alisha Haase

Evaluators:
Laurel Bidwell and Nick Metcalf

COHORT OUTCOMES
From 4/01/18 to 3/31/21 the Cohort jurisdictions decreased:

total number of youth in care by 29%
(from 514 to 365)

total number of youth in residential care by 39%
(from 170 to 104)

the number of youth removed from their families by 31%
(1309 to 907)

At-A-Glance

4. SUMMARY

Who and where?

The Alia UnSystem Innovation Cohort represents 5 jurisdictions from 14 counties in 4 states – Cass County, ND; the Eastern Iowa Service Area (EISA); Eau Claire County, WI; Washington County, MD; and Waupaca County, WI. Jurisdictional Cohort participants are directors and deputy directors, with support provided by Cohort professional and lived experts. For three years, Alia facilitated the Cohort by providing space, ideas, accountability, and encouragement.

What and when?

Starting March of 2018, the Cohort met for our first of many 2-day, in-person convenings. For the first year, we convened the Cohort monthly in person. The second year we alternated one month in person, one month on Zoom. The third year during the COVID-19 pandemic, we convened monthly, exclusively online.

Why?

Aligned deeply with UnSystem Guiding Principles, Cohort members are committed to micro and macro shifts that produce widespread, sustainable system changes to move toward family-centered prevention approaches to keeping families safely together. Pilots can be helpful to participants involved, but rarely scale. One agreement we made was to avoid pilot mentality and commit to system-wide change.

How?

Guided by a change process adapted from school settings with educators led by design studio IDEO (see earlier Cohort case studies for more detail[2]), the Cohort developed an aspiration that would be the North Star and benchmark of our work; our agencies will become places where, "*Family connections are always preserved and strengthened*." Learning from small changes or "hacks" and a bias toward action are two principles we borrowed from design thinking. Taking a developmental approach to change and evaluation, each month Alia responded to the needs of the Cohort from previous months and offered activities to support them through the challenge at hand.

Cohort meetings involved many different activities. Theory of change worksheets and role plays to practice talking points, evaluation maps to track agency changes, trainings about trauma and wellbeing for mindset shift, and visioning sessions about a new way of doing child welfare kept agency leaders engaged and focused.

Lessons Learned?

Lessons learned in the first two years of Cohort can be summarized into these 5 themes: 1. Prepare and take care of yourself and your team; 2. Think differently about the work; 3. Make the old way harder; 4. Trust families as the safe bet; 5. Expand the group of helpers.

Year three brought a pandemic, a global racial uprising, and more insights into how to build UnSystems. We learned the importance of things like: accessing legal support as a changemaker, the power of the Cohort model and time away to strategize and recharge, understanding how the nature of agency caseloads shift throughout the change process, meeting the distinctly different needs of supervisors and frontline staff throughout the change process, asking the right questions to get the data that matter most, and concrete support as an effective tool for keeping families safely together.

Foundational to Cohort insights is profound learning around the need for anti-racist and co-designed approaches to change and design. Inspired by Cohort work, Dear Leaders[3] is a set of theme-based discussion prompts and activities developed by lived experts and leaders in the field to help prepare child welfare teams to do community co-design as trustworthy partners.

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2 Cohort case studies: https://www.aliainnovations.org/resources
3 Dear Leaders tool: https://www.aliainnovations.org/dear-leaders

Traditional Child Welfare System

Current child welfare approaches often UNDERMINE the family system

BLAME

PUNISHMENT

SHAME
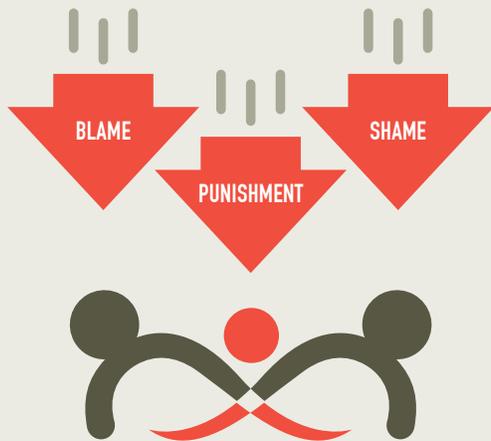
The current system adds more pressure on families in times of challenge, which undermines family wellbeing and healthy childhood development.

An UnSystem

UnSystem approaches BUILD family wellbeing and support healthy child development

Whole family at the center

Natural community supports

Focus on building resilience, joy, wellbeing, and health

Value and build rather than disconnect family ties

Local resources delivered immediately

Family-driven, culturally-specific supports

Supportive, consistent connection

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THE RESULTS (SO FAR)

Some resulting changes won't be seen for several years, and many things we learned are best told in story rather than numbers. Still, our goal is to have fewer youth removed from their families and in foster care without any increased safety risk. Here is what we achieved as a Cohort collective to that end:

From 4/01/18 to 3/31/21, the Cohort jurisdictions decreased:

the total number of youth in care by **29%** (from 514 to 365)

the total number of youth in residential care by **39%** (from 170 to 104)

the number of youth removed from their families by **31%** (1309 to 907)

Summary

5. YEAR THREE OVERVIEW

The Cohort in 2020

Times were challenging even before COVID-19 hit. Four of the five agencies experienced a change in leadership this year. Two directors were promoted and their agencies remained in the Cohort. Of the two agencies where directors left (both involuntarily), one agency remained in the Cohort and one exited. The leader of the fifth agency experienced extreme scrutiny, has endured a months-long burdensome investigation, with no charges filed and no resolution in site.

Cohort leaders felt the weight of coordinating and caring for staff during the pandemic, moving one unknown step after the other. Still, they did not remove themselves from the work of change on behalf of families. Cohort meetings moved to a virtual platform and the work went on.

Before COVID-19, our monthly (first year) and every-other-month (second year) meetings were in person. We spent the afternoon and dinner of one day together and the morning of the next – a solid 8+ hours – at the Alia offices in Minnesota. Included in our 2020 plan was to take Cohort meetings on the road, with jurisdictions hosting us in person at their agencies. This, of course, wasn't possible and did not translate well to a monthly, 8-hour group Zoom call, so we took the opportunity to spend more focused time with each jurisdiction.

Moving to a virtual format altered not only our delivery format but significantly impacted the time we were able to spend together. For the months in which we had initially planned in-person gatherings, we shifted to a 1.5 hour Zoom meeting with each of the jurisdictions, focusing on a topic to address their individual needs. We followed those meetings with a 1.5 hour Zoom call with the full Cohort. In alternating months, we held a two-hour Zoom meeting with the whole group. We also infused the schedule with several guests, a webinar and more email than usual to perpetuate the work in this challenging environment.
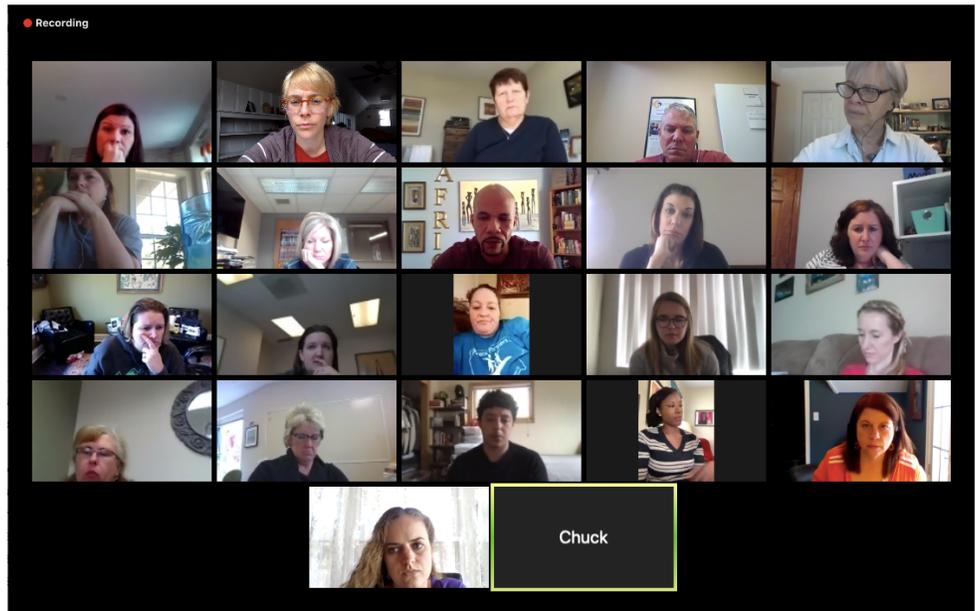
Is this what your 2020 looked like, too? We spent hours on Zoom together where – like in person – some moments are more engaging than others. We missed being together and are so grateful for this group who continue their systems transformation no matter what, even during a global pandemic.

Airline tickets were booked and food was ordered in March 2020 before everything pivoted to remote. The revised call agenda was split into two parts; Part 1: tending to more immediate needs of navigating in rapid change and addressing COVID-19 challenges and, yes, opportunities, as well as assisting with the wellbeing of those thrust into leading during very uncertain times. Part 2 continued for those who did not need to sign-off due to emergency response mode: crafting counternarratives and strategies for engaging community partners and legislators (the original focus of our in-person agenda).

In April 2020, when we hoped and expected the remote format to be a short-term accommodation, we held a two-hour Zoom call that continued conversation about working with families during pandemic lockdown. We also reviewed human-centered design techniques we learned recently, continued the conversation around safety data and overall Cohort evaluation, and shared online resources for how to live and work in a COVID-19 virtual world.

By May 2020, we realized that we weren't going to be in-person anytime soon, so offered jurisdiction-specific support where Alia could spend time in consultation with each agency in ways they needed. The all-Cohort call provided cross-jurisdictional learning as well as planning to advance outcomes in Year 2, with discussion around exposed inequities, safety data, outcomes data and the Year 1 case study and webinar.

After a summer break, the July 2020 call focused on the anti-racism revolution and the realities and opportunities in a post-George Floyd environment. Cohort members wrestled with their thoughts and feelings, inextricably linked to lived experience voices and how to change practice. Feedback in the case study webinar showed the number one issue for follow-up was "anti-racism in rural areas," an issue facing most of the Cohort jurisdictions. COVID-19 continued to dominate daily practice, and we first had the conversation about if calls are down, are kids still okay?

A special session was added in August 2020 with Tyreis Pierce and Angela Russell from DC Kinship Support Services Division who shared with the Cohort their best-practice model of how they work with families and the impressive outcomes their approach has achieved. In addition to specific topics, individual jurisdiction calls began the challenging work of crafting a concise story about their work to be shared in an infographic. The all-Cohort call provided additional cross-jurisdictional learning by pairing two jurisdictions to address plans for the coming year, anti-racism work and incorporating other voices into practice. The Cohort also heard about the Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Team (START) program in Washington County, MD.

By September 2020, we had three jurisdictions that had experienced very significant backlash to the change process and two who had not experienced pushback. We spent this call debriefing the situations – trying to ascertain why the variances occurred, what conditions were/were not present, what we learned, and most importantly, how might we equip change leaders who are just starting the change process. As always, there was a wealth of follow-up material and resources to supplement the all-Cohort calls, including the Iowa Kinship Report[4] and information about possible new allies.

In October 2020, work continued on two recurring topics that proved to be more challenging than first anticipated: data collection and infographic development. Comparing and synthesizing data apples and oranges across Cohort sites and capturing jurisdictional stories in a condensed, visual way was a group effort.

In addition, Alia CEO, Amelia Franck Meyer shared her synthesis of lessons to prepare and protect changemakers which formed the basis of a webinar on the same topic. This robust discussion resulted in the November 2020 meeting serving as a "watch party" for the webinar with pauses after each session for Cohort members to add their input about what lessons were missing and what additional information could help others – inside child welfare and in other systems – who are brave enough to lead change efforts. Building on the *Guidance for Leaders* section (pg 47) of the Cohort "YEAR ONE Practice Report[5]," the collective insight on managing the pushback to change is offered throughout this case study.

We gathered again in December 2020, via the all-too-familiar Zoom, to have a moment of sharing, reflection and intention to say goodbye to 2020, acknowledge that we had all survived a year of challenges, and to say hello to the new promise of 2021.

We were right back at it in January 2021 with individual jurisdiction meetings and an all-Cohort agenda focused on cross-jurisdictional learning and a look ahead to next steps before the cohort work wrapped up. Alia shared several resources that will be available to all, including the Phases Guidebook[6] and a Community Co-design Toolkit and online digital home for innovation. And, as always, more work on the infographics and data as well as focusing on post-Cohort jurisdictional support.

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4 Iowa Kinship Report: https://childwelfareproject.hs.iastate.edu/news/2020/10/12/kinship-project-study/
5 Year One Cohort Case Study: https://www.aliainnovations.org/unsystemcohortyearone
6 Phases Guidebook: https://www.aliainnovations.org/building-your-unsystem

Cohort members were not the only ones doing some wrap-up work and reflection. Former Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau Jerry Milner joined the February 2021 call to provide his reflections and observations of trends in the child welfare field. The focus was also on the future with the sharing of the IDEO "Dear Leaders" project that was underway. We interviewed a child welfare leader in Mississippi who shared with us her successful, long-term efforts to build trusting relationships with her local judges who leaned toward child removals, even "just for overnight." She advocated for "first placement as great placement" and through months of dialogue, that included stories from parents and workers about the negative effects of separation, their disagreement on prevention turned into alignment. It took three years to make significant change, but with persistence and through a focus on wellbeing, prevention, family voice, and trust, reduced the number of youth in care and the time they spent in care.

During the past year we invited several guests to join our jurisdictional Cohort calls for wisdom in certain areas. Vivek Sankaran offered advice on engaging workers throughout the legal system to advance family-strengthening approaches. Focusing on deeper community partnerships, Andrew Russo, Co-founder and Director of the National Family Support Network shared ways to support or initiate Family Resource Centers in rural communities.

The final scheduled Cohort meeting was held in March 2021 and served as a conclusion and wrap-up of the three previous years. We shared reflections, data, success stories, challenges, final commitments and next steps to allow the learning and resources to continue. There was no doubt that family connections *have* been preserved and strengthened in each jurisdiction over the past three years and that the five jurisdictions have permanently altered their work for the better. It was also apparent that the 11 original Cohort members, 8 current members who joined since the start and the 12 members no longer active all were impacted profoundly and personally through their participation with this group.

Cohort culture of connection

Even during the pandemic when we could only see each other on screen, what we at Alia attempted to create with and for the Cohort was a culture of connection and humanity. In physical or virtual ways, we always tried to remind the Cohort members how special they are as people and how important the work is that they do alongside other humans. We've sent handwritten cards, created photo memory books and videos, welcomed them with personalized cookies, had seasonal name placards as seat holders, and printed their images on gift socks.

We spend time in circle, sharing inspiration and accountability, and have come together in times of personal celebration and hardship. On top of being a genuine outpouring of gratitude, we hope to offer these experiences as reminders of how and why connecting as humans in a professional setting is so important. Over and over, we hear from child welfare stakeholders across the country, "How did we lose the 'human' part of human services?" Disconnecting ourselves from the work is a protective mechanism and "not bringing work home" has been encouraged. However, our lives are not split neatly between personal and professional, and connecting to our shared humanity increases our wellbeing and helps us show up with authenticity for the families we support at work and at home.

6. WHAT WE LEARNED
...IN YEAR 3

Much of what we learned in 2020 clarified or confirmed experiences that we had in our first two years of the Cohort (summarized in this document in the "What we learned…in Years 1 and 2" section). Several key insights from 2020 are persistent, significant, and have implications on the role of child welfare systems: advancing racial justice, meaningful partnership with families and communities, and concrete support to families.

Community engagement and anti-racism

In the first two years of trust-building, and step-by-step advancements toward a shared vision, we see authentic community engagement and racial justice as two major areas in which we as a Cohort underinvested. COVID-19 hit in year three of the Cohort, as did a global revolution for racial justice, thrust forward by the murder of George Floyd in the Twin Cities community where Alia is located.

No response to a global pandemic and no unraveling of systemic racism can be done outside of community – it takes everyone. Still, family and community engagement and anti-racism work continue to be a challenge for agencies across the country, including the Cohort agencies.

In August 2020, Alia hosted a webinar in response to the most popular content request to an audience poll: anti-racism work in rural (mostly white) areas. A box-checking activity for "diversity training" is how this is usually presented in child welfare agencies (including the Cohort) and does little to advance justice. There were more questions than answers, yet participants found support in sharing similar challenges from across the country.

Disaggregating data by race, utilizing blind removals, coaching for intentional debiasing, creating clear pathways for staff of color to advance to leadership positions, and strategic divestiture of resources to the community are ways to shift power and counter the systemic racism that exists in every child welfare agency. To varying degrees, the Cohort agencies utilize these approaches and these efforts have increased in the past year. Truthfully speaking, however, we live more in conversation than in action, and unlearning and repairing the harmful effects of white supremacy at the individual, organizational, and community levels moves at a glacial pace.

System accountability

Another more accessible and powerful way to shift power and promote equity is for agencies to show up in spaces with humility, ownership, and remorse for the trauma that system intervention has inflicted upon families. Speaking truth and publicly recognizing the damage that family separation has done to families, might begin to demonstrate to a community that a system can be trusted.

Preparing systems to be trustworthy partners in anti-racism practice requires a mechanism for accountability. We cannot rely on systems themselves to naturally self-reflect and share power. Anti-racism work and community engagement are intertwined for that reason – communities act as a mirror to agencies and agencies must be willing to listen and respond.

Peer support for parents

Peer support initiatives are leveraged among Cohort agencies in a variety of programs. An established, statewide Parent Partner program in Iowa, the launch of the START program (Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Teams) in Washington County, MD which includes peers in recovery on support teams, and a community program that offers peer support to those with felony backgrounds and substance addiction in Cass County, ND are ways that Cohort agencies rely on the wisdom of families and client peers to address challenges.

Peer support for enduring the current system may indeed be a stop on the way toward collaborative, co-created approaches to keeping children safely with families. Yet while these services to parents demonstrate a shift in mindset and produce positive results, we keep striving to get to a place where power is shifted, systems and communities work together to find solutions, and parents are offered support without entering the system. This type of collaboration with families requires a deep sense of trust and respect of families, as does offering concrete support in times of need.

UnSystem funds: Concrete support as child welfare intervention

Income instability is known to increase rates of child abuse and neglect and 2020 destabilized income for many families.[7] As an antidote, concrete support is an evidence-based intervention for reducing incidences of child abuse and neglect and the need for child removal, as clearly outlined in new data analysis from Chapin Hall[8]. Cohort funds spent on direct assistance to families confirms these findings.

The number of families who avoided child removal through concrete support is a clear indicator that not all children engaged in the child welfare system are under imminent threat of abuse or neglect. If a caregiver must work three jobs to provide basic needs, how can they pay bills to ensure their physical safety *and* spend the time building the relationships kids need for emotional safety?

UnSystem funds support communities

A portion of the philanthropy-funded support to the Cohort was used for direct assistance to families and communities to preserve and strengthen family connections. We called these "UnSystem funds" and they were used by the jurisdictions when other funding sources were exhausted. Three of the five Cohort jurisdictions fit the foundation's geographic focus area, and spent a total of $138,685 over two years to use in direct support to families and communities. This concrete support had a significant positive impact on preventing child removals and achieving reunification.

At the end of two years (funding was not available the first year of the Cohort), twenty percent (20%) of UnSystem funds were used to provide support to preserve and strengthen family connections for specific populations via community-based services. In part, the Cass County, ND team used this approach and utilized UnSystem funds in part to support two community programs:

1. New American Program
This initiative provides support and services to populations of New Americans within the Cass County area. Specifically, there were two projects that the grant funding supported:

   a. A New American Liaison was hired to educate families on child protection guidelines, to help families navigate the education system, provide transportation to services, assist in development of case plans that are culturally appropriate and accessing services when needed, for the purpose of lowering risks to children and keeping families safely intact.

   b. Convening a support network for New American women to come together as a group for exercise, nutrition classes, social interaction, and peer support.

2. F5 Program
The F5 program is a peer-to-peer program in conjunction with the child welfare and criminal justice systems, that assists people in recovery and in stabilizing their life. The program focuses on recovery support, employment, stable housing, and reduction of individual involvement with law enforcement and child welfare. The collaboration front-ends recovery support services to people with children to assist in stabilization and to reduce the risk of children entering community systems. Two families were referred by Cass County to the F5 program, and neither of those families became involved in the child welfare system.

7 Chapin Hall research: https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/1-s2.0-S0190740919308527-main.pdf
8 Chapin Hall data analysis: https://www.chapinhall.org/project/partnerships-with-jurisdictions-improve-implementation-of-family-first/

UnSystem funds support families directly

Eighty percent (80%) of UnSystem funds directly supported 85 families to alleviate financial burdens to help prevent separation or support reunification; over half of this was used for housing. In most of the situations, families were either struggling to pay rent, or needed help with first and last month's rent and security deposit (or a combination of the three).

While housing expenses were the highest expenditure in this category, support also included car repairs, temporary housing for the whole family, utilities, clothing and furniture, legal fees, basic needs like clothing, medical supplies and household items, and childcare expenses. Easing financial stressors also eliminated the need for a caregiver to hold multiple jobs or move into emergency housing and focus on connecting and supporting the youth in their care.

Of the UnSystem funds directly spent on families, 53% went to housing expenses. UnSystem funds were used in direct support to 85 families and resulted in reunification to biological parents or kin in 24% of cases (20 families), and prevented the removal from bio parents or kin in 61% of cases (52 families).

15% unsuccessful or in progress

24% reunification

61% removal prevention
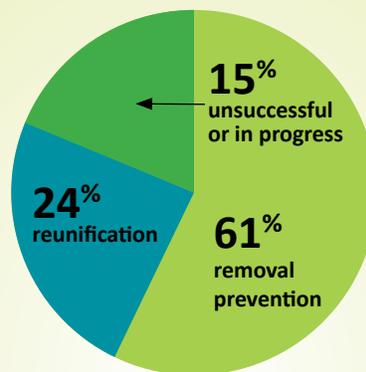
Creativity takes practice

An additional insight from administering UnSystem funds came from lower-than-expected utilization by frontline social workers. Leaders and managers presented to social workers access to UnSystem funds for the purpose of preserving and strengthening family connections, and to be used when other sources were exhausted or were not available. Support for rent and other basic needs are common, yet with these unrestricted funds, more options could be explored. It took time to help workers think outside the box of current funding requirements and be creative in supporting strong family connections that are so critical to lifelong stability. Here are some of the unique situations where UnSystem funds were used:

- Rent was paid for a youth's grandmother so she could afford moving expenses to relocate to Wisconsin so that her grandchild could be placed in her care as kin placement, preventing out-of-family removal.

- Monthly collect phone call charges allowed a young boy to remain connected with his parents while they were incarcerated.

- DNA testing was used to confirm the biological relation of two baby boys who came into care one month apart, allowing them to go to adoptive placement together.

- A birth mother with a previous traumatic birth experience of nearly losing her life, became fearful and emotionally disconnected when she became pregnant with her second child. A doula was hired to support the mother before, during, and after the birth to nurture this fragile, yet critical bond to her infant.

- Step-down rent support was offered to a father who was trying to regain custody of his daughter, allowing him to stabilize his housing situation in a manageable way, gradually increasing his rent payment over the course of 13 months.

- Transition-age youth in supervised independent living attempted to reconnect with family, who caused damage to the property. The youth was able to maintain stable housing with funds to repair the damages.
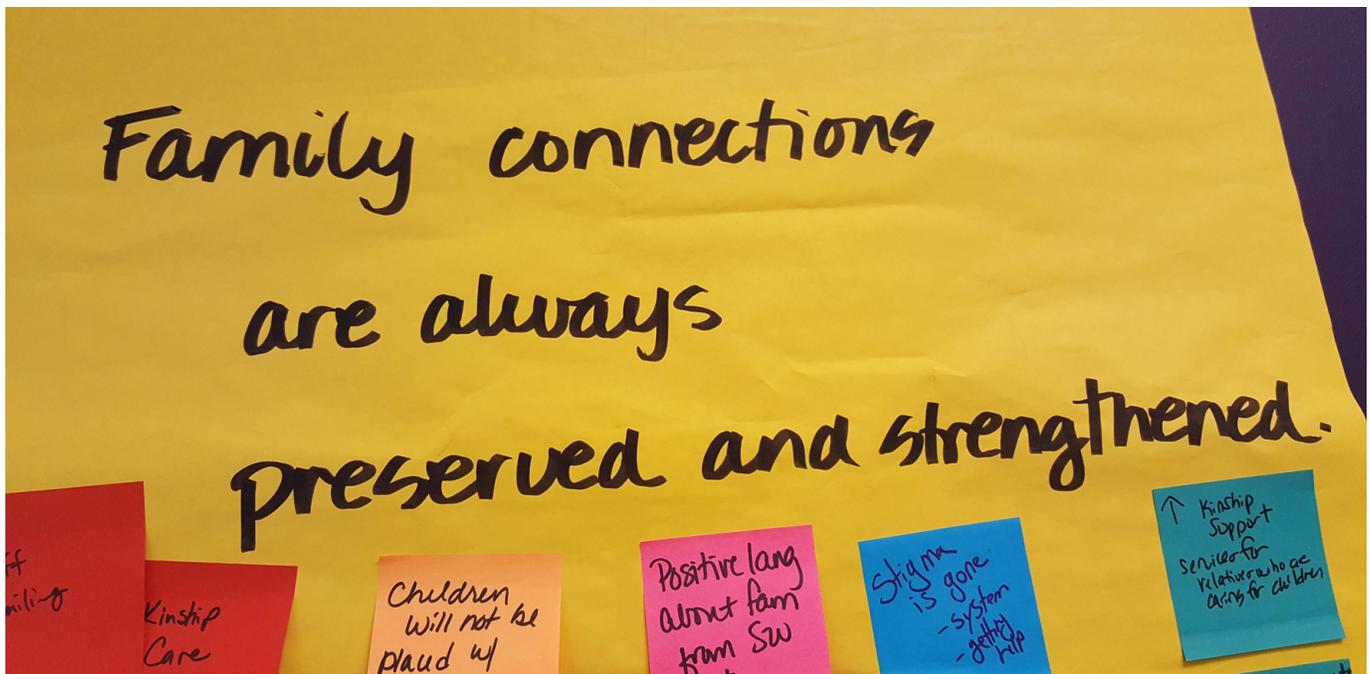
...IN YEARS 1 AND 2

Through our Change Framework[9], we identified desired behaviors, determined big ideas to nurture those behaviors, and performed small learning hacks to inch closer to realizing the big ideas, all to reach our overarching, shared aspiration. Over the course of our three years together, we adhered to the Framework progressively more in spirit and less in structure.

Our shared aspiration, however, became more rock solid over the years. *Family connections are always preserved and strengthened* became our mantra and permeated our work. These words made their way to our agency hallways, email signatures, staff conversations, job applications, and decision-making processes. With a spirit of learning, change efforts with this aspiration helped us continue to adapt our approach.

Year 1 and 2 Cohort Themes in Review

Five themes emerged in the first and second years of the Cohort and were reinforced in year three, summarized here (read about these in more detail, with practical tips, in Building an UnSystem: A Child Welfare Leader's Guide to Transformation, YEAR ONE Practice Report[10])

- *ONE: Prepare and take care of yourself and your team.* Agencies will work differently when leaders make changes. Influences can come from anywhere – internal staff, boards, community members, or schools, and yet leaders make changes in organizations. For leaders to be effective changemakers, to dismantle racism and uphold equity and justice, they themselves must *be well*.

  When asked how leaders can find time to take two days off a month to dedicate to Cohort work and still get their work done, one said this, "This IS the work; it's creating change, not signing papers. If I wasn't here on a monthly basis making changes in our department, know what I'd be doing? The answer is, 'what we've always done.'"

  Leaders must take time for team visioning, ally-mapping, building relationships where they don't exist, gathering a personal "board of directors" to support this work, and preparing to deploy self-care tools when needed.

9 Appendix B: Change Framework
10 Year One Cohort Case Study: https://www.aliainnovations.org/unsystemcohortyearone

- *TWO: Think differently about the work.* It takes repeated opportunities to examine assumptions and rethink child welfare to get off autopilot and consider new ways of work. Start with those closest to your work, like your leadership team. Change your language, take time to ask questions like, "Why do we do it this way?" or "What is keeping us from doing what we know families need?" or "What does it mean for a child to be 'safe'?"

  Support your team in creative problem-solving with families. Take the time to think through family challenges presented to you and ask new questions. Leaders must support staff embracing experimentation, outside the lines of the "right" way to do things. This is an uncomfortable place to be and requires a ton of communication among staff and with families.

- *THREE: Make the old way harder.* Once you can more clearly envision a different way of working with families, you can craft your decision-making processes to favor this new way. One Cohort leader said, "You put a roadblock where a roadblock needs to be and your get rid of the ones you don't need to have." Literally making it harder for staff to do their jobs in ways they always have will not always be met with enthusiasm. Leaders need endurance to help keep the agency focused on a vision, remaining vigilant not to draft back to "it's good enough" habits.

  Slowing down is an effective approach. Our wisest decisions are not made in high-stress, last-minute situations; that's when we fall back on the easy and familiar. Trusted relationships among staff and between staff and families lead to meaningful change, and that requires you to play the long game. Slowing down processes can lead to fewer removals and an increase in permanence for youth currently in care; this allows the potential for a redirection of funds toward prevention work.

- *FOUR: Trust families as the safe bet.* Start with families; look there first for a source of strength, connection, values, and love. Sitting at a table with a family and their supporters with the question, "What can we do together to keep this family safe?" creates space for families and workers to show up as collaborators. A different experience is accessible when we lean into families as partners and solution co-designers.

  The "way we've always done things" approach does not err on the side of keeping families together but defines "safety" as "physical safety." Removing children from families for perceived or potential physical harm is, through this lens, a logical response. However, the sense of belonging and connection that is interrupted when children are removed from their families (even for very short periods), sends shock waves through their family system. Every heartbreaking story of a youth who has been in care for months or years started with an initial removal.

  If placement is urgent, we believe there is almost always a connected placement option if enough time is taken to look, and resources are allotted to make it successful. We must check our biases and reassess our own judgments, recognizing that there is a difference between unsafe and dysfunctional. It is more important for children to *feel* and *be* safe from harm than it is for the system (us) to feel we are safe from criticism.

- *FIVE: Expand the group of helpers.* Leaders need help and families need help. Systems can and will not change without support of adjacent systems, and in fact desired change can be undermined by even one key decision made by someone in another system. It takes a village to raise its children and it takes a village to change its system. Expanding our group of changemakers is critical.
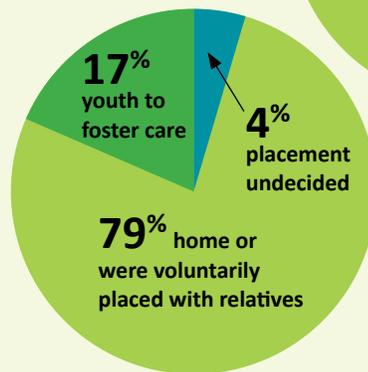
Family team meetings decrease removals

One practice that illustrates nearly every lesson learned is that of convening family members, loved ones, and agency staff at the time of potential removal to develop a safety plan for the family. Child Safety Conferences, Admin Safety Conferences, Family Team Decision Making – all are focused meetings with the goal of avoiding family separation.

In Washington County, MD, fifty-one (51) Family Team Decision Making meetings were held from 7/1/20 to 5/18/21 regarding eighty-two (82) youth. Fourteen (14) of the youth were placed in foster care, and sixty-five (65) were voluntarily placed with relatives or remained home. There were meetings involving three (3) children where no decisions were made.
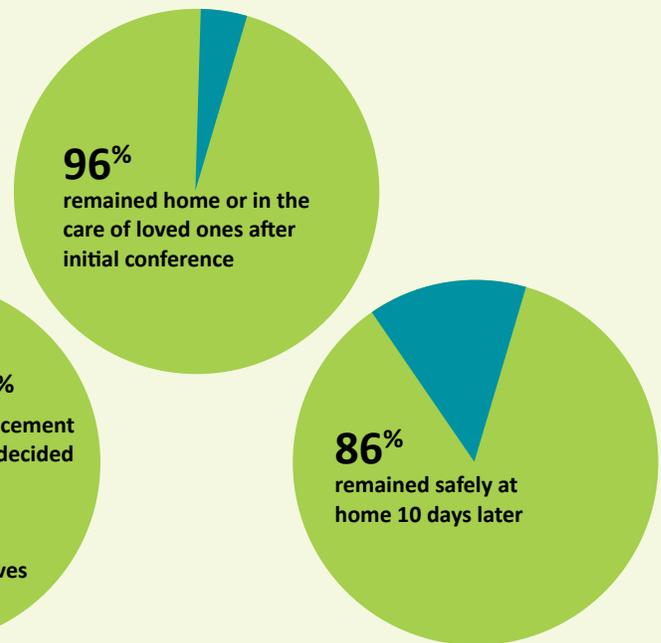
In the Eastern Iowa Service Area, Child Safety Conferences held from 10/1/18 to 9/30/20 involved 426 youth. 96% of these youth (409) remained at home or in the care of loved ones after the initial conference, and 86% (366) remained safely at home 10 days later. With these wildly successful outcomes as demonstrated effectiveness, Iowa is now offering Child Safety Conferences throughout the state.

Eastern Iowa Service Area

From 10/1/18 to 9/30/20, 426 youth involved in Child Safety Conferences
96% (409) remained home or in the care of loved ones after initial conference
86% (366) remained safely at home 10 days later

96% remained home or in the care of loved ones after initial conference

86% remained safely at home 10 days later

Washington County, MD

51 meetings from 7/1/20 – 5/18/21 involving 82 youth
79% (65) home or were voluntarily placed with relatives
17% (14) youth to foster care
4% (3) placement undecided

17% youth to foster care

4% placement undecided

79% home or were voluntarily placed with relatives

Part of what makes these meetings effective is the scope of people involved – it truly is a team. Families can invite whomever they feel would be of support to them. The agency decision-making process moves up the chain of command usually requiring someone at the (area) manager level to sign off, therefore sharing responsibility for placement decision should there be negative consequences. Also, the goal is for the youth to remain safely at home. Shifting the approach from, "Do we need to remove this child?" to "What will it take to keep this child safely at home?" allows for more creativity and collaboration.

Managing pushback to change

As the second Cohort case study was due for release, we found ourselves amid increasing levels of pushback to the changes Cohort leaders were advancing, with tensions arising from a variety of places outside and within agencies. At the last minute, adding to the five learning themes above, we included a "Guidance for Leaders"[11] section specifically addressing tensions related to the pushback to change. Here is a recap:

"Guidance for Leaders" helps readers understand how to interpret resistance, alert leaders as to where it can come from, and shares how to ease the burden of change. For example, we learned to understand those who react negatively to the changes you are trying to make by looking through the lens of fear and loss – what do others stand to lose should your vision become realized? Also, change work is relationship work, so from local governing bodies to school leaders, wherever relationships become challenging – *lean in*. Who isn't clapping when you succeed? Invest in that relationship. Further, take care of yourselves by calling in supporters, understanding your agency processes and regulations, and developing a clear counternarrative to those who speak out against your family-centered work.

Throughout 2020 and into 2021, agencies continued to experience resistance. This often felt surprising, and as one leader reflected, "We thought the love for the work and the results – fewer youth in care, more support to families, lower turnover – would speak for itself, but it doesn't." Intentional, broad partnership in this change work is crucial, as is a tight dedication to creating the public narrative. Boards, law enforcement, and the public can catch wind of a detail taken out of context and make erroneous assumptions about what is happening in an agency. Without a counternarrative, these falsehoods and half-truths go unchallenged and are taken as fact. Alia helped create short, simple infographics describing each agency's vision and process, meant to help circulate a more complete picture of the change process and the results they were achieving.

For example, a staff member found misusing gift cards (even if the situation is fully remedied) can turn into rumors of widespread financial mismanagement. Confusion and rumors could have easily ignited around the use of Cohort UnSystem funds – a philanthropic (not County) funding source dedicated to providing UnSystem-like supports to families in qualifying Cohort communities. Without knowledge, an internal or external staff or partner could misinterpret the use of these unrestricted dollars as misuse of county taxpayer dollars, inciting rumors that are extremely difficult to reign in.

Time and resources for communication or public relations support is well spent. Intensive media scrutiny for the sake of developing sensational stories are often inaccurate or one-sided and can undermine your progress significantly. Keep your finger on the pulse of how changes are being perceived.

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11 *Guidance for Leaders: Field Notes from Alia" on pages 47-54 of Building an UnSystem: A Child Welfare Leader's Guide to Transformation, YEAR ONE Practice Report* https://www.aliainnovations.org/unsystemcohortyearone

> **"We thought the love for the work and the results – fewer youth in care, more support to families, lower turnover – would speak for itself, but it doesn't."**

… FROM LEADERS

Another way to support your change efforts and inoculate your change process against resistance is to elevate other voices on behalf of the new agency direction toward prevention and prepare those around you for change by predicting its course.

Get support from outside

Move toward UnSystem approaches supported by the federal Administration for Children and Families, evidence-based practice models, and neuroscience of trauma and attachment. Pointing to other examples and experts to support your work is also one way to help staff cope with public pressure, as they, too, will be challenged in their work.

Leadership in Iowa used the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) to prepare the state for movement toward prevention work and assembled binders of evidence from other states to share in support of this shift. Being able to ask, "Why?" in a constructive, productive, informed way can help you enter into non-judgmental dialogue with those who question the values or viability of a model of family support that obsoletes the need for stranger foster care altogether. Pointing to an outside, corroborating source of information can take the heat off you.

Own the message

That said, be sure to make any new approaches distinctly yours! Outside influence, however evidence-based or value-aligned, can be experienced by some community members as directive or tone deaf to them and therefore quickly expelled. Use new practice or ideas as inspiration to your locally specific efforts, pointing to "experts" only when you think it will advance *your* family-centered work. Take ownership of the change effort, even if you are receiving formal or informal support. Outside ideas, inspiration, or guidance must only be adopted in support of *your* efforts to support the families in *your* community.

This is a challenging line to tow but be mindful of the time you invest internally and externally on supporting the changes you are trying to make. If you are seen as spending too much time in the community, the team may demand your attention and rebel. If you focus too much on internal culture, however, the community will rebel, having been left out of the change or left misunderstanding your vision. Consider the Director and Deputy Director positions as having complementary internal and external focus areas.

Forecast change

To the maximum extent possible, predict for your teams and colleagues what's to come. Specifically, spend time preparing all stakeholders about how a shift to UnSystem practice will reflect in your agency's budget. Budget deficit surprises are highly inadvisable! "Nobody cares <what you're doing> if your budget comes to zero," one Cohort leader said, noting that changes go largely unnoticed until there are budget implications.

You know it's coming – inevitable overlap as you phase out current practice and phase in new practice, ramping up prevention support, so forecasting a multi-year budget showing initial deficits that turn into surpluses can help avoid reactions to budget deficits that occur early on in the change process. Talk with your staff and board about what they can expect, that it may take several years for you to shift the resources toward prevention that you saved by decreasing the number of youth in care.

Communication in sync with parent partners can be helpful here, as they can relay messages which align with the vision your agency is moving toward. Audiences generally have a deeper listening ear for parents; it is meaningful to hear from someone who's lived it. They can speak about their experience of child welfare involvement and share about how a family's protective factors can render removal unnecessary, saving years of family hardship and community resources.
(NOTE: Take special care that parents offering support for prevention-based shifts in public or nonpublic ways occurs under mutually beneficial terms, not tokenizing or extractive. If you're not sure, call us.)

Find your fellow changemakers

"To be organized is not just counter to the loneliness of change, but it will help you be resilient," said one Cohort leader. Meaning, a coordinated, strategic effort of changemakers (even a small group of people) keeps you from feeling isolated *and* fortifies your change efforts against resistance.

Find the people across your agency who align with your vision of radically supporting families to stay together. The power of a small group of people with very high trust spread throughout your organization cannot be overstated. This is both an art and a science; you may need to remain patient until you have the right people in the right positions to create the changes at the right time in the right place.

Secure legal advice

Leaders, you are your greatest asset and must therefore protect yourself. Before launching your agency into systemic shifts, you must assess not only agency readiness but self-readiness from a legal perspective. Before being hired, consider an employment contract that includes a predetermined severance pay, as changemakers can be forced out of a position should specific people become uncomfortable enough. It is wise to identify and connect with an attorney you can call on your own behalf if you feel your employment is threatened without due cause. An attorney that represents the agency is not appropriate counsel to you as an individual.

...FROM THE COHORT PROCESS

Cohort member survey results

In addition to evaluating the outcomes in the jurisdictions, we reflected on and evaluated the Cohort process itself. To evaluate Cohort members' perceptions of the process, two surveys were conducted for the Cohort agency leaders and guides. One survey in February 2020 included questions pertaining to planning and implementation. The second survey administered in April 2021 solicited feedback about participation, speaker involvement, impact of the cohort, and planning for potential future work.

Cohort members felt their participation was a valuable use of their time and aided in change efforts in their agency. Leaders unanimously reported that the Cohort accelerated their progress in helping "strengthen and preserve family connections." In both surveys, participants reported that the most beneficial aspect of the Cohort was "challenging the way I think" and "getting new, practical ideas for how to shift my system." "Time with individual jurisdiction teams" was rated as less beneficial in the second survey, perhaps because of the virtual format of the Cohort in its final phase, but recommendations for a future Cohort included involving others more deeply.

- *I would have wanted more staff involved in the Cohort. We brought Managers into one meeting, but I believe we could have had even more buy-in if we had brought more staff in on a regular basis.*

Cohort agency leader quote
Janée Harvey, Adult, Children, and Family Services Division Administrator, Iowa Department of Human Services: "It's hard to get out of the office, but we never regretted coming to Minneapolis and having that space made a big difference. Without that, Lori <Frick, EISA Service Area Manager> and I may have been in meetings together and appreciated each other but wouldn't have had time to name and make commitments together and collaborate with others. Holding space for creative thought (what Alia provided) is so important and valuable. A natural expectation was also around collecting data, measuring impact, and without the data any great work is less believable to others. The theory of change and the work with Laurel <Bidwell, 2018-19 Cohort evaluator> helped us to be more organized with the intent and impact, especially with Child Safety Conferences. Getting an Attorney General in the Western Iowa Service region may have happened without the Cohort, but that idea and how to fund it came out of conversations with Alia."

The areas of focus shifted as the Cohort matured: initially, participants wanted greater attention spent on operationalizing the vision, with less time on envisioning the new way and spending unstructured time connecting. As the Cohort evolved, a focus on envisioning the new way became the priority. In the first survey, a third of the participants felt the pace of the Cohort was too slow, and only half felt it operated at the right pace, but by the final check-in all the participants felt the Cohort had found the right timing.

Over the three years, all five Cohort agencies hosted a mix of Cohort guides and/or Alia staff at their jurisdictions to provide training and support to a wide variety of audiences: staff, management teams, community partners, foster parents, judges, and boards of directors. All five agencies invited guides with lived experience to share their stories. Agency leaders have appreciated this expanded network, with access to speakers, trainers, and lived experts (often all in one) to share with their teams the importance of keeping families safely together.

The agencies started in the Cohort at different stages of change, and the disparities became clearer as the work continued. Some agencies saw themselves as further ahead and wanted different things from the Cohort, but all found their participation personally beneficial in some way. Comments included:

- *Furthered my passion and the commitment to the work we were getting started on. Also helped developed personal-professional relationships that helped sustain the work.*

- *My value on partnering with individuals with lived experience has changed dramatically.*

- *Helped root me deeper and clarify my convictions.*

What's best about the Cohort?

Cohort participants included the following as key benefits received from their participation:

ONE: Gives new ways of thinking about the work

TWO: Brings legitimacy to the changes I make

THREE: Challenges me to follow-through

FOUR: Personal support to stay motivated

- *There are so many excuses to prevent change when you work in a public, governmental hierarchy. Yet, there are absolutely opportunities around every corner to do just one thing differently. And, that one thing might be all it takes. One drop can cause a big ripple....*

- *The Cohort has allowed for not only a space to imagine "what if" but actually provide resources and support to move from "what if" to "let's try."*

- *We need to build professional connections and partnerships beyond our own system. Working with other teams from around the country helps challenge our thinking and allow for greater creativity and sharing of ideas.*

- *Helped move a statewide system. That's powerful.*

...ABOUT AGENCY CHANGE

No agency or person experiences change in the same way, yet it was important for us to capture the process of change to help identify patterns. Here are ways agencies can predict and manage the change process based on what we experienced, and some observations as varied by role.

Caseload complexity increases

Every Cohort jurisdiction put measures in the place to slow down the pace and ease with which children could be placed away from their families. Implementing family team meetings (called "Child Safety Conferences," or "Family Group Decision-Making," or, "Family Engagement Planning," depending on the jurisdiction) is a highly effective removal prevention technique. Working with judges to consider alternatives to placement away from families was also very effective, leading to lower removal rates. Involving and aligning more decision-makers in the process brings more resources and ideas to the table and leads to better outcomes for kids.

At the same time, every Cohort agency also decreased the number of youth in congregate care settings, starting with those whose paths to reunification

> *"As removals decrease and the number of youth in group settings decrease, the youth and families who remain engaged in child welfare present the greatest challenges."*

or less constrictive, more connected settings, was clearest. As removals decrease and the number of youth in group settings decrease, the youth and families who remain engaged in child welfare present the greatest challenges.

As one leader put it, if you work harder on the front end, you no longer see children who may have been removed in the past for ADHD, for example. Instead, you see youth and families with highly complex, longstanding challenges, which demands more, highly skilled support. We saw this reflected in the data, as Cohort agency lengths of stay in care trended upward, meaning youth are taking longer to achieve permanence. Expect this trend in your change efforts as well.

Policy informs practice, practice informs policy

Change efforts have compounding effects when there is broad alignment across agency departments – in different locations, departments, and service lines. Aligning vision and practice at all levels of an agency and allowing policy and practice to influence the other are imperative for sustaining change.

When state policy, local practice, agency data, and family input inform one another, your change efforts are more reliable and sustainable. Enacting policy that isn't realistic for practitioners or has unintended negative consequences for families further codifies harmful practice.

On the flip side, for sustainability, insights from day-to-day work alongside families must be elevated to spaces where process and policy changes can be made. Justice-promoting policy must be informed from work on the ground, which then can take root with policy that supports it.

Get state support

Every jurisdiction received some degree of support from their state offices to begin involvement in the Cohort. The closer the state remained part of the process over the three years, the easier these agencies advanced prevention-based approaches. An Iowa Cohort leader was promoted to a higher state-level position during the Cohort process, allowing the team to move forward with greater relative ease, experiencing less pushback than others.

In 2020, North Dakota restructured its regions from counties to zones and the state redesign (at time of publication) shifted data collection and storage mechanisms resulting in more distance between Cass County Cohort leaders and agency outcome data that is key to informing practice. Multiple, rapidly shifting (redesigned) organizational processes and practices within child welfare as driven by the state have posed operational challenges at the zone level.

Layer your efforts

Making changes in agency approaches to radically preserve and strengthen family connections can be fortified by adding layers of alignment throughout the organization. When hiring new staff, interview questions can reflect and screen for this shared value. Once hired, staff can be called to perform against this measure: How have you preserved and strengthened family connections? Collaborative decision-making leads to fewer removals and greater consistency. Team members and families can ask throughout the process, "Is this really the best, most connected option?" Creating multiple touch points to a vision of prevention helps operationalize and solidify change efforts.

Have a legal support plan

In county administered systems, a County Administrator and a Corporation Counsel (Corp Counsel) can be strong legal advocates. They can protect you and your team when inevitable pushback comes. A social worker pushing back against placement in a court proceeding will likely need legal cover from a judge who relies on removal to be "on the safe side."

In Wisconsin, Offices of Corporation Counsel advise the county board, departments, and committees – including both the department of Health and Human Services *and* sheriff's office – on legal matters. One entity simply cannot represent two county departments at the same time, so have a game plan for when internal misalignment has legal ramifications, such as appointing a special counsel. Find someone now you can call, as you do not want to be scrambling to secure legal advice from someone you trust in a moment of crisis.

Different roles, different experience: Focus group data

In Spring 2019, Cohort Evaluator at the time, Dr. Laurel Bidwell, Associate Professor of Social Work at St. Catherine University in Minnesota, interviewed a total of 173 members representing each of the five jurisdiction sites regarding their perceptions of the Cohort change process that began approximately one year prior.

Results from these in-person focus groups and interviews were originally analyzed and presented in our Year One report. Recently, though, these same data were reanalyzed to look at themes by job category. It became clear that there was a trickle-down effect, where frontline staff and community partners were still struggling with how to implement the vision(s) developed as a part of the Cohort.

Leaders as change strategists
In our analysis, we see the upper leadership and administrators who participated directly in the Cohort as the change strategists (as defined by Kanter, 1992[12]). This group focused on shifts in practice as seen at the 10,000 level. They focused on the "why" of the change and were responsible for developing and communicating the guiding principles and vision for it. During the first year of implementation, they were leading their agencies through a major mindset shift, and they were focused on new and innovative ways of engaging in family-centered practice. They also focused on creating accountability and increasing support for frontline staff (managing risk, bringing in more resources and pushing back to outside entities). During interviews and focus groups, the Cohort administrators mostly believed the changes were occurring as they "should be" or according to plan, and frontline staff didn't always feel that way.

Supervisors as change managers
Supervisors had not been attending the Cohort meetings, yet as direct change managers, they were expected to serve as the interpreters for the change. For this group, there was a duality of role where they understood and supported the vision of the administrators, but simultaneously needed to translate the vision and support the frontline staff in doing the work. While the managers often aligned with the vision and felt more empowered to do things the way they had always wanted to do them, feeling support from administrators/upper management in doing so, they also talked about the additional pressures associated with the new ways of doing things. They described experiencing a desire and pressure to do things the "right" way, feeling as if they were under a microscope. Safety and liability issues, they felt, often rested on their shoulders. They also described facing barriers to getting things done in terms of finances, the courts, staff turnover and staff workload.

12 Kanter, R. M., B. A. Stein, T. D. Jick. 1992. *The Challenge of Organizational Change: How Companies Experience It and Leaders Guide it.* Free Press, New York.

Frontline staff as change recipients

Focus groups and interviews with frontline staff members showed that the change hadn't trickled down proportionately. This group was very mixed in their response to the change. It was clear that frontline staff were aligned with the vision of keeping children with their families, with many staff feeling that it wasn't really a new concept for them. However, this group also felt as though there were still numerous barriers getting in the way of executing the vision of the change strategists.

First, they talked about change fatigue, where there were so many new initiatives happening at once that they were feeling overwhelmed. They also described a skepticism (especially the more seasoned workers) that the change efforts were a part of a new fad that would disappear in favor of something else new coming along. While some frontline staff also described excitement about being given permission to be innovative and explore new options for families, this excitement wasn't shared by all staff, as some seemed to be riding out the wave until the fad ended.

Some staff described extra support from supervisors and upper-level management, but some described less, as they saw an increase in meeting times pulling the supervisors away from the frontline. Frontline staff, regardless of their buy-in, described a sort of black box where they felt removed from the decisions being made by administrators. They wanted more communication and to receive information directly from the cohort meetings, so that they would understand what was happening and why. They asked for a "road map" so that they could see where they were supposed to be going.

The change recipients also described feeling a heavier burden in trying to provide more intensive, individualized services with high caseloads. They felt they were carrying the highest risk by being on the frontline making decisions that felt uncomfortable based on their previous experiences and fear of doing the wrong thing. Many also felt as though they didn't have the resources to implement services in the way that would best support families (housing, transportation, finances, policies). These stressors were described as impacting their own wellbeing. Several frontline staff also spoke about the fact that they were feeling guilt and shame around some of their past decisions and practices (were they good enough?).

Lastly, frontline staff spoke about the impact on their community partners, where there was even less training and support for the changes. Interviews with community partners were consistent with frontline staffs' assessment: there were different levels of buy-in and they wanted more information and support along the way. The changes were being felt – but not clearly understood -- by foster parents, law enforcement and schools, and partners reported that relationships and education were key to keeping the community's trust and collaboration. Community partners' feedback during focus groups and interviews revealed that they generally felt that services were being pulled back without providing the community with more finances or assistance in taking on additional work and responsibilities. Some articulated that it was scary to be faced with holding so much risk and responsibility that had historically fallen on CPS.

The analysis of focus group data by job category may serve as an important reminder that change is experienced differently depending upon a person's position in the organizational structure. Change strategists or upper-level administrators may be so immersed in the change efforts that their perception of its implementation may be optimistically tainted. We invited all managers to our monthly Cohort calls and provided special support to supervisors to help bridge the connections between UnSystem theory and UnSystem practice.

Special support to supervisors

If supervisors aren't aligned with a vision, they will not be motivated to operationalize it with staff. Lessons learned from the Cohort work and the focus group analysis prompted a Cohort agency supervisors-only monthly call from February to November 2020 to increase their direct contact with Cohort work. At this point, the jurisdiction leaders had been coming to Cohort meetings for two years, with their supervisors receiving information and hearing about their experience secondhand.

The monthly calls with supervisors allowed Alia to offer support for their specific challenges and continue to advance the shift toward prevention-based work in their agencies. They were able to consume firsthand information, experiencing for themselves a bit of the inspiration and challenge that happens at Cohort meetings.

Each month, joined by one of the Cohort guides, supervisors arrived with thoughts on a predetermined discussion topic or came to explore specific, presenting challenges the supervisors face. Call topics included: anti-racism (especially in rural areas); confronting bias in decision making; making the "old way" harder and expanding the group of helpers (two themes from the Year One Cohort Case Study); and learning more about parent partner programs.

While attendance on supervisor calls was small, it helped give the supervisors a taste of the ideas exchanged during the Cohort and also gave them a chance to dig into more of the "how" of change. For example, one supervisor asked the group, "How do you know when a family is ready to be done with services?" They and their workers were torn. On one hand, we don't want families to be system-involved longer than necessary, yet on the other hand, we want to be able to provide support however long it's needed. Supervisors found it meaningful to address these day-to-day decisions together, applying UnSystem values to everyday work with families.

...THROUGH DATA COLLECTION

Developmental evaluation

Because the Cohort is a developing innovation, we used developmental evaluation as an evaluative approach, adapting to changes as they come. We value extensively researched, evidence-based practice with rigorous controls – an approach that works well when you can clearly describe the intervention up front. Operationalizing an UnSystem is not that type of work. We are looking for insights into what mix of agency interventions are most effective and where change can occur: for Cohort members, agency staff, youth and families, and community members. We look for both process and outcome measures, in both qualitative and quantitative ways.

For the most complete picture possible, we looked at the Cohort process from many perspectives, looking for signals of change. From the Cohort leaders and guides we collected surveys of their experience of the Cohort approach to change. Agency staff participated in focus groups to share their experience of the change process. Case reviews were done with agency staff to capture the effects UnSystem funds had on families, and family outcome data were captured to help us determine the effects on Cohort agency families as a whole.

Knowing the data is necessary for measuring a change in the data, to identify effects of your work; yet determining which data to capture can be a challenge. Outcome data paired with current research data make a compelling case for change. For example, knowing that increased frequency of child and family visits leads to higher rates of reunification and permanency, measuring visits and ensuring close geographic contact becomes important data to collect and makes a difference in the lives of families. And, disaggregate data by race or age and you find different groups have different experiences with child protection, which can help an agency provide a more appropriate intervention at the right time.

Our approach to data

Our vision is reflected in the UnSystem Guiding Principles, and this work is discovering how they become real in the lives of workers and families. The complexity of systems change means looking for behavior changes from different angles, in different places, for movement in small and big ways. Generally, we ascribe to the business adage, "If you can't measure it, you can't improve it," yet obstacles and power dynamics remain. Who decides what's worth measuring and how do we know we're measuring it accurately?

The data we gather and the methods of collection do not tell the whole story here, so we use what we have and provide additional context and questions to expand our accepted ways of knowing. At the same time, we must work with the information and tools at our current disposal, even though they are limited when used for measuring where we're going rather than where we are or have already been. For example, AFCARS data do not reflect parent experience, healing from relational trauma, or the mindset shift of a leadership team – all potential indicators in a new way of doing child welfare. What if our only barometer was a one-question parent survey: "Do you feel you are better or worse off having been engaged in the child welfare system?" We could simply do more of what helped people along and less of what didn't.

So, did the five Cohort agencies become UnSystems? No. Did they get closer? Decidedly, yes. The imperfect indicators we use here to describe what has occurred in the past three years are a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, captured to reflect the experience of the five agencies represented and the families with which they engage. Further, we expect that intervention made early in the Cohort will not manifest in measurable changes for months or years, even if we could fully measure it.

Data quality and consistency vary

Jurisdiction by jurisdiction, the capacity of each agency to access and analyze data was unique. The range included robust data systems and usage to develop a statewide data dashboard (Iowa)[13] to data housed in state offices with limited access by counties (North Dakota), both state administered child welfare agencies. Access to data, the complexity of child welfare data definitions and requirements (even standardized), and staff capacity for data collection and analysis all contributed to significant challenges in comparing like data across Cohort agencies.

Trends in outcome data

Data were collected from each jurisdiction for 36 months at six-month periods from 4/1/18 to 3/31/21. We focused on three main family outcome metrics as signals of progress: 1) total number of youth in care, 2) total number of youth in residential care, 3) and total number of child removals.

> *"What if our only barometer was a one-question parent survey: "Do you feel you are better or worse off having been engaged in the child welfare system?" We could simply do more of what helped people along and less of what didn't."*

From 4/01/18 to 3/31/21, the Cohort jurisdictions on average decreased:*

the total number of youth in care by **29%** (from 514 to 365)	the total number of youth in residential care by **39%** (from 170 to 104)	the number of youth removed from their families by **31%** (1309 to 907)

* Waupaca County outcome data are not included in these aggregate statistics, as they exited the Cohort in 2020. Their outcome data can be found separately in the "By Jurisdiction" section of this document.

Average lengths of stay for youth in care trended upward, which matches agency experience. After focusing on slowing initial removals and finding placements for current youth in care who have more clearly presenting permanency solutions, the cases that remain are youth and families with complex and long-term challenges to permanency. We don't yet know, however, if family situations are becoming more complex or if it is the families and youth who have been system-involved for an extended time; more data analysis is necessary.

Termination of parental rights (TPRs) also trended down among Cohort agencies that track TPRs. Generally, this is viewed as positive, as fewer youth are legally severed from their families. However, the disruption and lag time in court proceedings due to COVID-19 may have contributed to the decline in numbers.

One trend was noticed by the Iowa team months after introducing Child Safety Conferences. Re-referrals were going up, which was surprising at first. However, a focused, by-hand look at the data revealed that while re-referrals were increasing, the severity of reports was decreasing. Meaning, families were still getting reported, but for less egregious behavior, which could be interpreted as increased family safety and stability.

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13 Iowa Data Dashboard: https://dhs.iowa.gov/dashboard_childwelfare

The design of our current system is to self-perpetuate and understandably, we remain loyal to the activities that keep us financially sustainable because veering off track feels risky, even if we think it might be best for families. Similarly, current data requirements keep us dedicated to tracking and focused on these particular metrics, even if we know there are more relevant data to collect. However, if our goal is for family connections to be preserved and strengthened, and for youth and families to remain safely together – does our data evaluation reflect that? How might we explore new ways of measuring success and safety that more closely match our values?

Safety data

Many Cohort hours were spent on addressing child and family safety – what it means for youth to *be* safe and to *feel* safe. Out-of-home placement is not risk-free, and we cannot assume that removal is the "safe" choice, especially if you equate the importance of emotional and

> *"Child welfare agencies are simply not equipped or required to measure what may be the most important family metrics – connection, emotional safety, or resources to adequately care for your own children – which may give insight into how and why these achievements remain out of reach."*

physical safety. Other industries that employ high-risk interventions – medical device, nuclear energy, financial services – use complicated algorithms to assess safety and risk, which are consistently updated and refined. Removing a child from his or her family can have the same devastating, lifelong effects as a faulty pacemaker or plummeting investment earnings, therefore child welfare data analysis should be just as precise.

No child on the planet can be completely out of harm's way, yet often we dole out failing grades to families with a less than 100% safety rating. With varying degrees of data definitions and collection capacity across the Cohort, mining for more precise data on safety was extremely challenging. For example, because our aspiration is that "family connections are always preserved and strengthened," we implored placement as it relates connection. Events such as sibling group disruption or placement farther than 50 miles from a child's primary community is extremely detrimental to maintaining connections with loved ones. Agencies are not routinely asked for this so do not have a consistent method of gathering it, yet several counted by hand, case-by-case, these statistics. Once you see it and record it, you can practice to it, and change it.

Incidences of maltreatment or death while in care of the state compared to incidences of maltreatment among families of origin; the number of assigned versus substantiated cases of abuse; re-referrals to child protection; or the number of youth missing from care – these are all additional areas we could look for data that would offer key insights to the question, "Are the kids okay?" Further, none of the Cohort agencies routinely capture parent voice or satisfaction and any other agencies across the country that do are by far the exception.

Are kids actually safer in foster care than at home? What if youth and families are no safer with CPS involvement than they were without, or before? What happens after the Cohort? Will the changes they made have staying power? Alia will continue to collect outcome data every six months to monitor progress.

Child welfare agencies are simply not equipped or required to measure what may be the most important family metrics – connection, emotional safety, or resources to adequately care for your own children – which may give insight into how and why these achievements remain out of reach. We have struggled with connecting UnSystem vision and values to data collection and analysis in ways that are both meaningful and feasible given demands of staff time and capacity.

Cohort return on investment for families

The total number of youth who remained home (were not removed), those who left foster care, and those who left residential care is 617 and philanthropic support to the Cohort was $750,000. If we see this as a $750,000 investment for 617 youth, this equals $1216 per youth. For a ballpark cost comparison, the average daily reimbursement rate of group residential care for youth in Minnesota in 2020-2021 is $300.23. A $1216 investment would purchase four days of residential care for one youth.

7. BY JURISDICTION

Each of the five Cohort jurisdictions represent communities with different cultures and challenges and agency leaders have therefore taken different approaches to change. Jurisdiction by jurisdiction, here are some highlights from the past year:

Cass County Human Service Zone, North Dakota

Cass County, ND is located in the far eastern part of the state along the North Dakota/Minnesota border. It is the most populous county in North Dakota with a population of approximately 178,000. The community has seen a dramatic population increase over the past several years due to diverse employment opportunities.

It has been a time of change in Cass County as the State of North Dakota is undergoing a redesign of child welfare practice, and county work has been reorganized into Human Service Zones. A new director, Pearl Mell, was hired in 2020 and inherited a workforce after a tumultuous year where one staff filed a complaint against management for a toxic work environment. Inquiries took place and tensions were high. Plans were submitted on how to address the problem, however with the change in leadership these plans had not been strategically implemented and many staff still felt the issues were unresolved.

Pearl came from the health care field and is an expert at implementing processes to streamline work and create a culture, but she is new to the child welfare space and has faced a steep learning curve to acclimate to the intricacies of this work. Pearl came in fresh with grave seriousness about what her job entails, and that is making legal, ethical, and loving decisions on behalf of children and families who are in some of the most challenging moments of their lives.

In March 2020 on Pearl's first day of work, the County Commission issued an emergency declaration for COVID-19. While this kept Pearl from meeting face-to-face, which inhibited relationship-building, she has been enthusiastic about receiving support from a professional mentor and Alia and has embraced the vision of the Cohort as her own. Their mantra is, "*Cass County Human Service Zone: We work together to support families and prevent the harm of separation. It's the North Dakota way.*"

Pearl and Cohort-colleague Deputy Linda Dorff have been working to achieve the goals set out last year: to fortify their staff to withstand the changes, invest in workforce wellbeing, and building trust among their team. As a result, Cass and Alia conducted trainings on the human need for belonging and a new way of work, and led a Breakthrough Day with staff to allow managers to connect with each other and support their teams, still recovering from a difficult year.

In spring of 2021, Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota (LSSND), a long-time community service provider filed for bankruptcy and closed their doors. Losing this 102-year-old, statewide community resource has been a challenge, yet they continue to work alongside other community providers, including culturally specific support to the New American population in the area, which was a focus area for LSSND.

Participating in the Cohort helped the team in Cass County recover from an internally tumultuous year that challenged their cohesiveness and resilience. Also, the North Dakota state child welfare redesign is inspired by values resonant of an UnSystem approach, therefore participating in the Cohort helped them prepare for the new safety practice model rollout.

Pearl and her team continue to build up the leadership team with consistent team meetings, reviewing processes in need of streamlining, addressing issues of diversity and inclusion among the team, and are investing in continuing education, training, and development opportunities. Pearl holds quarterly town hall meetings and hosts open office hours. Staff have also participated in organizational culture workshops. The leadership team is tending to the "why" with staff, giving hope to staff that there is a goal and vision to which they can commit. Pearl has implemented reflective coaching with a trained coach for the manager and supervisors of the Family Services Team.*

* Appendix C: Cass County, ND infographic

Eastern Iowa Service Area

The Eastern Iowa Service Area Department of Human Services (EISA) is a 10-county area in eastern Iowa that begins in Dubuque County and runs along the Mississippi River to Lee County. Though the area may be considered rural, it also includes several larger cities like Davenport and Dubuque and serves a total population of approximately 500,000.

The Cohort members, Lori Frick and Janée Harvey, represent a powerful dynamic that blends practice with policy coordination. Lori, the Eastern Iowa Service Area Manager, and Janée, the Division Administrator of Adult Children and Family Services at the state Department of Human Services, are able to advance initiatives in tandem on a local and state-wide level. This combination has proved especially effective and has allowed EISA to lead the state in innovation and outcomes.

Building on goals from the end of last year, EISA continues to build in ways that support connections and placements with kin, and to employ more incentives to their services community to leverage support. Contracts with providers have been restructured to reflect these values, and data has been used to effectively redirect services toward the new way of work.

Becoming more organized and intentional with data has also played a key role in Eastern Iowa's particular focus with the court system. Iowa has deployed several initiatives as a way to reduce termination of parental rights cases, including a pilot project with seven judges (see below). Team Alia and Cohort guides met with other social work leaders who have successfully partnered with judges adverse to keeping families together and in August 2020 guest Vivek Sankaran, clinical professor of law at the University of Michigan Law School, met with Iowa Cohort members regarding community and system partnership engagement.

Vivek's advice included helping courts and schools understand and get on board with 2018 legislation FFPSA (Family First Prevention Services Act), *engaging* as strategy (asking for ongoing meetings, structured conversation outside of courts) and *pressure* as strategy (parents lawyer network to help challenge court decisions).

Also recommended was that jurisdictions ensure their departments are legally well-represented, especially since reimbursement is more widely available for legal representation (for children, families, and IV-E agencies).[14] Social workers can be aggressively challenged in court when advocating for families and should be offered legal support. Further, leaders can be instrumental in providing trainings for new juvenile judges, perhaps in coordination with your state's Court Improvement Plan funding.*

Four questions, seven judges

Four questions were posed to audiences during an Alia, 6-session training tour around the state of Iowa, questions judges should consider asking themselves before placing a child out of home. The Iowa Department of Human Services and Iowa Children's Justice (a division of the state judicial branch) turned these questions into a pilot program across the state in which seven judges volunteered to ask themselves these four questions before approving a request to remove a child from his or her home. They are:

1. What can we do to remove the danger instead of the child?
2. Can someone the child or family knows move into the home to remove the danger?
3. Can the caregiver and the child go live with a relative or fictive kin?
4. Could the child move temporarily to live with a relative or fictive kin?

As reported in the June 2020 issue of *The Iowa Lawyer*[15], over a four-month pilot, the judges received 83 requests for removal and granted just 44 of them. Of the 44 approvals, 24 of the children or sibling groups were placed with family members, and 5 with friends, leaving only 15 children/sibling groups placed with foster families with whom they had no previous relationship. This compares to 99 removals in the four months preceding the pilot!

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14 The federal Child Welfare Policy Manual states that IV-E agencies may claim administrative costs for attorneys to provide legal representation for the title IV-E agency, a candidate for title IV-E foster care or a title IV-E eligible child in foster care and the child's parents to prepare for and participate in all stages of foster care related legal proceedings, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cwpm/public_html/programs/cb/laws_policies/laws/cwpm/policy_dsp.jsp?citID=36, Question 30
15 http://205.209.45.153/iabar/IALawyer.nsf/13ccaa12737005fd87257eca006abf85/3596845b58764dce872585890065e5fe/$FILE/June%202020%20 Iowa%20Lawyer%20Final.pdf, pgs 10-12
* Appendix D: Eastern Iowa Service Area infographic

Eastern Iowa continues to serve as a pilot to test the effectiveness of new interventions before they are implemented state-wide. EISA hired a county-specific attorney general with great success, leading to the creation of a similar position in the western portion of the state. Eastern Iowa's Child Safety Conferences, a requirement prior to a potential child removal, have been so successful at keeping children safely at home or with someone they know, that the conferences are being implemented on a state-wide basis.

In July 2020, EISA Social Work Administrators started dialogue about race and bias in order to support further conversation among teams. Implicit bias training is encouraged, with follow-up discussion led by unit supervisors. The state executive cabinet team, which includes Division Administrators across the Department of Human Services and the Department of Public Health, attended two all-day trainings and three facilitated workshops about applying equity in policymaking and social determinants of health. They are also reading, "White Fragility" by Robin DiAngelo and discussing implications for their work in policy and contract development.

Eau Claire County, Wisconsin

Eau Claire County is a rural area in western Wisconsin, with an approximate population of 104,400. The Human Services Department, led by Cohort-member director Diane Cable, had been laying the foundation to become a trauma-informed organization before the Cohort began. The momentum accelerated thanks to the process of the Cohort – maybe a bit too fast for the comfort of some of the staff, causing leadership to pause and regroup as they spent more time hearing staff concerns and supporting them in the transition to a new way of work.

This year, Eau Claire's goals focused on building on the training and encouragement they have offered to their leadership team and entire staff and helping them play a more active role in creating change. Eau Claire is also investing in Intensive Permanence Services (IPS) to achieve permanent, loving placements for youth who have been in care for an extended time. The Department also continues to invest in worker wellbeing and fostering staff resilience through wellbeing groups and weekly all-staff calls with their director.

The Department's theme is: "*Eau Claire Human Services Department: Evolving and Responding*" and never was that a more essential need than this year. In addition to the pandemic and the challenges it created for serving families and tending to worker wellbeing, in August 2020 the Department came under investigation by the County sheriff for a yet-undisclosed reason. There was no fiscal wrongdoing, no child death, no dramatic precipitating event, yet the work has engendered fear and suspicion in those unfamiliar with its intent. Foster care, residential care, court, and therapy are approaches that are familiar to many, so redirecting funding in support of families rather than removal of children can raise suspicion. At the time of publication, the investigation is still ongoing with taxpayer-funded investigators visiting Cohort members at home and contacting frontline staff at Cohort agencies for information. No charges have been made.

In March 2021, a new Deputy Director was hired following a retirement and reflected to Diane how clear it was that all staff know the vision of the department is to preserve and strengthen family connections. The team continues to keep that vision front and center and to "evolve and respond," despite the external challenges outside their control.

The team in Eau Claire is integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion in board conversations and have been examining some data disaggregated by race. In a recent data mining initiative, they found that 3% of families involved in the Birth to Three program are African American (which is representative of the community), but a third of Juvenile Detention Center youth are African American. This new awareness can then lead to more focused conversation and specific approaches to eliminate racial disparity.*

* Appendix E: Eau Claire, WI infographic

Washington County, Maryland

Washington County, Maryland is a rural county of approximately 150,000 people located in the Appalachian region of western Maryland between Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Under the leadership of Director Mike Piercy and Cohort members Tiffany Rexrode and Amanda Bishop, the County has been persistently working to strengthen families, even before they joined the Cohort.

Washington County's efforts are characterized by steady, focused integration of new approaches and initiatives that work together to improve conditions for families. Their mantra is to "Say YES!" when invited to participate in community meetings or new partnerships and they have leveraged these connections to realize positive outcomes and reduce removals of children.

The County has been at this work in different ways since 2007 when they shifted practice to include more family voice and routinely using family team decision making efforts to prevent sheltering youth. The Alia Cohort was the next step in their process toward developing family-centered approaches. Board members and some staff have come and gone since then, but the department has maintained consistency in vision. In August 2020 Tiffany, the county's Assistant Director, accepted an interim position at the state (as Acting Assistant Deputy Secretary for Programs for the Maryland Department of Human Services), yet she remains connected with Cohort work and Amanda Bishop stepped in to seamlessly continue making progress at the County level.

Washington County has intentionally engaged their whole workforce in the change efforts. Tiffany and team have consistently pulled in their managers and supervisors to be a part of the process and embrace it as their own, making family preservation part of the fabric of who they are as a staff. The County invited many Cohort guides as guests to share wisdom with their teams. "We owned the message early and often and didn't distance ourselves from Alia or the Cohort," Tiffany said.

Alia CEO Amelia Franck Meyer presented for all staff to share grounding messages and to help them maintain creativity and openness in situations they find as roadblocks. Dedicated to making family preservation a reality, the Washington County team consistently wrestled with bridging theory and practice in the day-to-day, addressing situations such as:

- youth who consistently run away from placement
- parents with serious and persistent mental illness
- partnering with the whole family
- creative ways to keep siblings connected
- effectively engaging fathers
- youth who report not being ready to go home
- when to end services for families long engaged with the system
- exploring bias against birth parents, mental illness, or substance users, and
- generally "buying into" the importance of reunification

Cohort professional guide Dr. Jessica Pryce helped the team in its equity work by delivering equity training for all staff and talking about "tasks of the privileged" among staff. As part of its equity efforts, the County adopted blind reviews of cases and has diversified its workforce, with work still to be done in diversifying the management team.

Building on their goals from the end of last year, Washington County wanted to leverage state support for prevention work and identify barriers to a prevention approach. The County was seeing significant outcomes for children under 10 but had greater challenges in reducing placements of older youth and those with who had been in care the longest. To address this, the County hired a social worker specifically to address older youth. The County continues to explore grant-funded opportunities in support of families, including possible implementation of an Alia model of permanency which includes in-depth trauma healing exhaustive family finding.*

* Appendix F: Washington County, MD infographic

Administrative Safety Conferences were created to reduce removals and the County initiated a Parent Partner program to further engage families in creating plans to keep their children at home. From 7/1/20 to 5/18/21, 51 Family Team Decision-Making meetings were held involving 82 youth. 17% of the youth (14) were placed in foster care, and 79% (65) were voluntarily placed with relatives or remained home. There were meetings involving three (3) children where no decisions were made.

Community-based and trauma-competent substance abuse is still a big need in the community. The department has issued RFPs for contracted services, but community capacity is limited. With robust state support, Washington County initiated START (Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Teams) focusing on families with children under the age of five as an initial response, but they are still seeking a long-term solution to address the ongoing issues with the population they serve.

The team in Washington County has been in conversation about assumptions and bias toward substance use and are asking themselves challenging questions about how it shows up in their work. Who is using and what are they using? To what extent is it impairing the ability to safely parent? For example, if capacity isn't impaired but it's a high-risk drug, how do you respond? How old are the children? Do (white) staff respond differently to Black parents who are using? A safety matrix considering these elements would be a valuable tool for supervisors and discussion guide for families.

Waupaca County, Wisconsin

Located in east-central Wisconsin, Waupaca County is considered primarily rural. The total population of the county is approximately 51,000. Wisconsin is a state-administered, county-run system. Since 2012, Waupaca County DHHS has been on a journey of transformation to create a culture that is built upon a foundation of trauma informed care principles and rooted in the knowledge of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). DHHS has also concentrated on staff health and wellbeing, understanding that a healthy workforce is vitally important to the work.

Unfortunately, the Waupaca County Board Health and Human Services Committee decided to exit participation in the Alia UnSystem Innovation Cohort in 2020. Alia partnered with Waupaca County since 2015, initially to support organizational change to become a more trauma-informed County.[16] In 2017, Waupaca County leaders participated in the Ten of Ten for Kids design event to reimagine child welfare, and from 2017-2020, Alia provided training and consultation in the areas of leadership coaching, strategy, and workforce wellbeing. As the Waupaca County Health and Human Services Department continued to advance in their work to keep more children safely with their families, aligning practices with current research, and gaining national and international recognition, there was increasing external discontent. External partners noticed that things were changing and not as many children were entering out-of-home care. This felt to some that the department was not doing their job because they were placing far fewer children in foster care. Tension increased, and after holding two closed session meetings (and two months into the COVID-19 pandemic), the board decided to move forward with a change in leadership. Both the Health and Human Services Director and Deputy Director (whose department also manages public health) left shortly thereafter, no longer employees of Waupaca County.

Following those resignations, the County Board hired a former Director of Waupaca County Department of Health and Human Services who had been in the Director position prior to the outgoing Director, signaling a preference to return to the previous ways of work. Additionally, at the Waupaca County Board meeting on August 3, 2020, the Waupaca Health and Human Services County board voted on this motion, "That Waupaca County no longer participates with Alia programs. There's to be no contact by our employees directly or indirectly with Alia or its cohorts who participated in the Alia program on Waupaca County time." This motion meant that not only was the formal relationship and Cohort participation ended, but that County employees could be disciplined if they had any contact with Alia staff during their working hours.

There were also positive comments, including Board members who said, "…when you look at both sides of it you can see the good things that Alia has done." Another board member said, "I feel like a lot of good has come from Alia…I don't want us to get in the place where we're just constantly vetoing things to support families and to help kids." The Director suggested some of the Cohort work was simply, "good old-fashioned social work" that could be continued without Cohort participation.

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16 "Waupaca Story," https://www.aliainnovations.org/resources

The Waupaca County Board decision to leave the Alia UnSystem Innovation Cohort also meant that the advanced consultation, training, and travel reimbursements that Waupaca County received from Alia through the Cohort participation at no cost, came to an end. They also forfeited access to over $30,000 per year for two years in unrestricted UnSystem funds which were used to help families stay safely together and avoid children coming into expensive out-of-home care. UnSystem funds allowed staff to be innovative, providing support to families in new and different ways. The Waupaca County Board members also voted to return a Parents Supporting Parents grant, valued at nearly $1,000,000 that, under the previous leadership, Waupaca County won in competitive bid from the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families.

Momentum and progress forward is not guaranteed, even when it has been in place for years. With a few quick votes, the County Board was able to remove the Director, Deputy Director, participation in Alia's services and Cohort, and return over $1,000,000 meant to support families in Waupaca County.

Prior to their exit, however, the family outcome data reported were encouraging. From 4/01/18 to 3/30/20, the total number of youth in care in Waupaca County decreased by 37% (from 27 to 17), the total number of youth in residential care decreased by 70% (from 10 to 3), and the number of children removed from their homes decreased by 33% (from 12 to 8). They also recorded fewer siblings separations and reduced rates of maltreatment while in care. The small population and therefore these total numbers may not seem significant. However, if these trends and percentages were achieved across the country and the total number of youth in residential care reduced by 70%, that would be roughly 60,000 children.[17]

Waupaca County Cohort leaders invested deeply in their team, building wellbeing and cohesiveness internally as a foundation upon which to engage in the community and bring in family voice more deeply. However, had community members, parent partners, or families with personal experience in the system been more deeply involved, their feedback and guidance may have been a bridge between agency practice and board and community partner concerns.

In the time after the previous Director was reinstated, numerous losses in key staff were sustained as those who had been committed to a vision now faced a crisis of conscience. On a positive note, those who have left continue to carry the insights and learning with them, now pollinating practice in new places of employment.

8. WHAT'S NEXT?

Just keep going

All we could do this past year, and all we can do any year is take the *next right step*, or sometimes more accurately, take any next step that seems like it could be right, but you don't really know because nobody really knows. We can always draw on our shared vision and believe in the power of seeing things a different way. The Cohort agencies made fundamental changes in practice with modest to no funding, relying on mindset shift to activate movement. Imagine the tectonic shifts that could take place with more people and more resources.

What occurred among agencies were shifts in mindset about what is possible and necessary for youth and families, new initiatives and programs, and access to a modest amount of unrestricted UnSystem funds (for 3 of 5 Cohort agencies). What did NOT occur were sweeping policy changes or a massive influx of resources. There were leadership changes, intense local pushback to change efforts, a global pandemic, and a fever pitch of racial reckoning. This is to say, what the Cohort agencies achieved given their resources and challenges, can be achieved most anywhere.

We can rest, but we can't stop; we can take a step that inadvertently leads to a dead end, but we can't give up. This year also reminded us that control is an illusion; so much of our experience is a response, not a lead. Our job, then, is to stay grounded in our values and when the wind changes, adjust our sails to advance toward our destination, where *family connections are always preserved and strengthened*.

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17 Data from Children's Bureau: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcarsreport27.pdf

Alia will remain in close contact with the Cohort, still invested in their progress, still capturing their data. We believe it is possible for the child welfare system to be redesigned, to meet families in real life in real partnership; it is Alia's goal to demonstrate ways to make that happen. What are the most favorable conditions for change and how might UnSystem approaches advance strategically and organically? The work of the Cohort is a rich experiment, consisting of five separate learning journeys, each with relevant and significant insight to share with the field.

Upcoming Alia projects

As an extension of this discovery work, Alia is commencing a 33-month project in Rock County, Wisconsin utilizing a community-based human-centered design process to address this query: How might we eliminate racial disproportionality in Rock County Human Services Department (HSD)? As a Cohort we did not focus specifically on eliminating disparity or advancing racial justice, nor did we the achieve levels of community collaboration we hoped. Focused on these growth areas, with increased philanthropic support, and a trusting relationship developing between Alia and Rock County HSD leadership, the Rock County community co-creation for eliminating racial disparities became a reality.

This is the first project where Alia has hired within the local community to carry out the work in that community. A Project Director and Community Cultivator located in the Rock County region will lead the community-focused grant project to achieve greater racial parity in child welfare. With support of an IDEO design team and a cadre of national specialists in racial equity, there are many lessons to be learned. Stay tuned as we share the journey.

Alia is working on dozens of other projects across the country to build the capacity of child welfare leaders and organizations so they may be prepared for large-scale reform. These projects include permanency, workforce resilience, leadership coaching, and organizational strategy. We are also developing partnerships and strategies for several long-term, statewide, transformation efforts involving human-centered design, anti-racism and debiasing approaches, and involving multiple stakeholders.

Rebuilding post-Covid: Dear Leaders

Funding was provided to Alia to design support for leaders in rebuilding their upended agencies post-pandemic. We convened a group of lived experts and child welfare leaders to participate in a co-designed, IDEO-facilitated human centered design sprint in January 2021. Rebuilding with any relevance or sustainability would require working alongside community stakeholders, so we expected to develop a set of tools for leaders to co-design with communities.

However, through a series of raw conversations, the group instead developed a set of tools for addressing the critical pre-step for child welfare agencies: becoming a trustworthy partner. Child welfare systems are structured to make demands of families, make decisions for families, and question the motives and capability of families. This unchecked power dynamic naturally leads systems to a mindset of self-importance, lack of self-awareness, and mistrusting families, making authentic partnership nearly impossible.

A set of questions, conversations, and activities created by this group of lived experts and leaders (many are both), is intended to support systems to get in right relationship with the community *before* engaging in co-design. It's called "Dear Leaders" as it was developed as personal appeal to leaders in the field to reflect, take accountability, and show up with humility. Families and communities have been wounded by the child welfare system and agencies engaging as partners with little regard to what they represent has potential for additional harm. Avoid unintended harm done in attempts to co-design with community, by visiting the Alia website to find Dear Leaders and use it with your own teams (available August 2021).

Bright Spots

In 2021, Alia is also busy with creating an online space for sharing innovations in the field of child welfare. After a series of focus groups including lived experts, public systems and community leaders, a platform for vetting, sharing, and implementing family-strengthening approaches is underway. Look to Bright Spots for child welfare system redesign approaches grounded in UnSystem-like mindset shifts and get connected to others working toward the same goal. Launching 2021!

9. FUTURE STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the course of three years of dreaming and learning and practice change, there were many times we said to each other, "Someone should really study/develop/commission/try that." Far from exhaustive, here are a few things that came up for us in the past three years that, with investment, could build the evidence base and widen the path forward toward UnSystem as standard practice. We are not the first who have approached these challenges, so if you have wisdom to share, please get in touch with us!

- **Social return on investment study on kinship care**. For the sake of children's emotional wellbeing, a case can be made that they remain in the care of loved ones. We are examining if a fiscal case can also be made for the investment in kin families as foster families and where savings may occur. Can we demonstrate a higher return on investment when comparing social and emotional outcomes for youth placed with strangers versus youth in similar circumstances placed with kin?

- **Best practice approach for substance-exposed newborns**. If family connections are always preserved and strengthened, connections made between mother and newborn are some of the most precious and critical. How might we translate into practice what we know about the benefits of early attachment (for baby and mom), maintaining safe physical connection (under hospital observation, if necessary) so that strong connections can occur?

- **Comprehensive child wellbeing and safety assessment**. The occurrence and/or likelihood of physical harm is what the child welfare system is designed to assess, and its most widely used and well-funded tool is removal to foster care. As an intervention, the damage due to separation is not considered as grave as its consequences truly are, and the harm of separation is not undone at a moment of reunification. How might we more precisely assess when a child is at risk, treating removal as a nuclear option, deployed with care and precision only when every other approach is exhausted?

- **Safe substance use screening tool**. Similarly, not all situations where substances are involved are equally hazardous, so how might we more precisely assess? What substances are being used? By whom? With what frequency and duration? How old are the children? Can other adults be relied upon when substance use renders an adult unable to safely parent? Can a tool such as this be given to families to create their own safety measures?

- **Preparing for pushback to change.** We have seen unrelenting resistance to UnSystem approaches, the kind of backlash that springs from deep fear or violation of values. Moving away from questioning the character and motives of system-engaged families and seeing support as an investment in families rather than an opportunity to be taken advantage of requires a big leap in mindset that many are not prepared and willing to take. So as changemakers working toward systemic equity and justice, who trust in the wisdom of families, how might we best prepare to lead organizations to becoming UnSystems? It requires more than traditional management and leadership skills; proficiency in community organizing, racial justice, issue framing, and communication skills are needed. How can we help our changemakers develop these skills?

- **UnSystem workforce skills**. Many leaders, supervisors, and frontline workers believe deeply in relinquishing control over and sharing power with families yet feel stuck in the confines of our current structure. Timeline requirements, unmanageable caseloads, and unnecessary documentation keep us from spending time and making connections, and seeing people as human beings rather than "cases." But systems demand it, so our universities teach to it, and our students and future leaders and workers expect it. Our workers are taught to make cassette tapes, but our field is becoming a music streaming service, so to speak. How might we train our new and current workforce to work to practice in an UnSystem? What do they need to learn and unlearn?

- **White supremacy in child welfare**. As a field, we are unable and unwilling to acknowledge the extent to which the child welfare system is steeped in whiteness as complete and absolute. With unequal racial representation between those who investigate and those who are investigated (a glaring symptom), how might we be summoners of justice and restoration? At the individual, interpersonal, organizational, and communal levels?

Guiding Principles for an "UnSystem"

The following is a list of guiding principles for an "UnSystem," an idea born at the 10 of 10 for Kids national convening in May, 2017 that brought together 100 innovative thinkers from around the country and IDEO to redesign child welfare. When the four-day event ended, we had not identified a new design for child welfare, rather we had thirty prototypes for programs, services, and apps; thousands of post-it notes; hundreds of evaluations; and many new partners and friends. As we continued to analyze all the information before us, some clear themes began to emerge around locally delivered, family-driven, culturally specific community supports focused on building wellbeing and resilience.

Continued conversations and information gathering, including an additional listening session with the 10 of 10 designers, resulted in identifying the following guiding principles. Those who are committed to a new way of supporting children and families are challenged to uphold these Guiding Principles.

- ## Protect relational connections as sacred

    We regard trusting relationships and secure attachments to specific people (biological family members and self-identified "family") as the foundation of lifelong wellbeing. Connections to communities (geographic, faith, cultural, and other) and attachments to traditions should also be treated as necessary for survival.

- ## Trust the wisdom of children and families to design their own futures

    We view families as their own experts, whole, undamaged, and capable. We defer to families (to the extent safe and possible) to decide what they need, what services they receive, and who is involved - to be architects of their care. We support the personal journey of every individual and family to becoming as capable as possible in determining their futures.

- ## Commit to intergenerational wellbeing

    We know trauma that occurs in families must be healed within families. Targeting one young person or family member within the family unit is insufficient for long-term family and community wellbeing and resilience.

- ## Insist on racial equity and radical inclusion

    We challenge the individual bias and structural oppression present in the child welfare system as evidenced by the overrepresentation of people of color. Racism, ageism, homophobia, and all other forms of bias and systemic discrimination are vigorously identified, challenged, and rectified.

- ## Dare to share power

    We recognize that by working together we can come up with better solutions than we can alone. Agency leaders with agency workers, workers with families, workers with other workers, and agencies with other agencies: seeking other perspectives and employing shared decision-making will lead us more quickly to solutions that work.

- ## Nurture the capacity for joy

    We see the ability to experience and express joy as a measure of wellbeing, an expression of every person's birthright, and only accessible when other foundational safety needs are met. We vow to create space to nurture widespread wholeheartedness where young people, families, workers, and leaders are safe enough to express vulnerability, hope, bravery, and joy.

And when in doubt, *DO WHAT LOVE WOULD DO.*

Guiding principles compiled by the team at: Alia
Innovations for people and systems
impacted by childhood trauma

CHANGE FRAMEWORK

Alia Innovation UnSystem Cohort

1 ASPIRATIONS
Start with your aspirations for seeing families as the solution.

2 BEHAVIORS
Get specific about what behaviors you hope to see.

**3 "BIG IDEAS"**
Gain inspiration for UnSystem-like ideas from:

• Lived experience guides
• Professional guides
• Cohort special guests
• Your experience

... and more!

4 SMALL "HACKS"

USE LEVERS OF CHANGE
Brainstorm elements you can design
To create change in your agency

HACK IT!
Do quick, cheap experiments
to try new ideas and begin to shift behaviors

Family connections are always preserved & strengthened
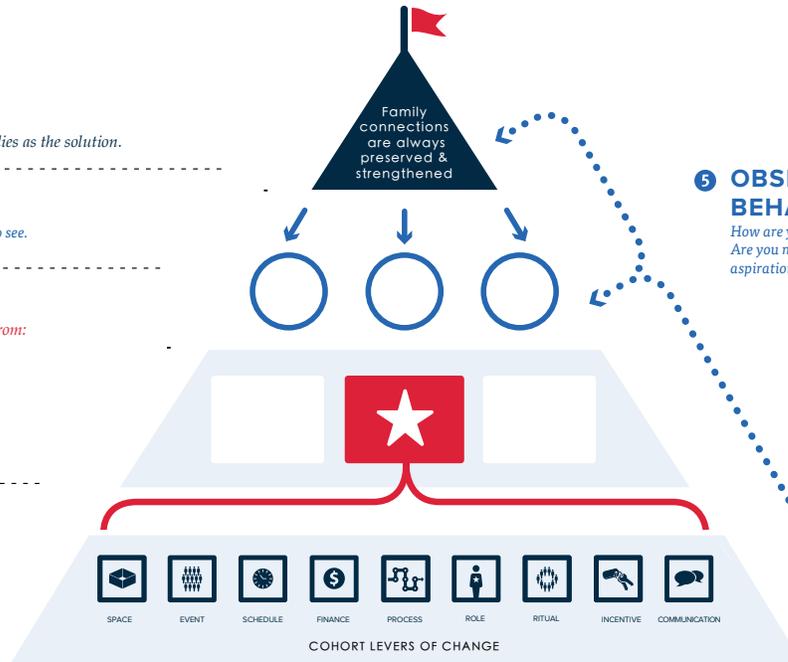
5 OBSERVE BEHAVIORS
How are your hacks changing behaviors? Are you making progress towards your aspirations?

SPACE EVENT SCHEDULE FINANCE PROCESS ROLE RITUAL INCENTIVE COMMUNICATION

COHORT LEVERS OF CHANGE

Framework adapted from:

Cass County
Human Service Zone

We work together to support families and prevent the harm of separation.
It's the North Dakota way.

Practice research, federal policy shift, and North Dakota's state redesign all support a family-strengthening approach.

It's good for children and right for North Dakota families.
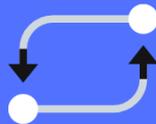
Family First Prevention Services Act
1

Research on Family Preservation
2

Click boxes to explore!

ND Children's Cabinet
3

State Practice Model Shift
4

U.S. Children's Bureau Movement
5

We know more than ever about what children need to thrive: **an uninterrupted sense of belonging.** Removing children from their families is a known predictor of life-long challenges; **we must do all we can to keep families safely together.**

1. *Family First Prevention Services Act:* https://familyfirstact.org
2. *Research on Family Preservation:* https://www.aliainnovations.org/research-brief
3. *ND Children's Cabinet:* https://www.legis.nd.gov/assembly/66-2019/documents/19-1121-05000.pdf
4. *State Practice Model Shift:* https://www.kvrr.com/2019/11/20/north-dakota-behavioral-health-is-redesigning-its-social-services-program/
5. *U.S. Children's Bureau Movement:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYeqHUzy5yI

Appendix C

Cass County
Human Service Zone

Family strengthening by the numbers
Cass County outcomes

Between April 1, 2018 and March 31, 2021

↓ *27*% **decrease in children removed from families (78 to 57)**

↓ *44*% **decrease in number of youth in residential or group care (9 to 5)**

↓ *29*% **decrease in termination of parental rights (21 to 15)**

IOWA Department of
HUMAN SERVICES

PRESERVING & STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Eastern Iowa Service Area (EISA)
leads the state in innovation and outcomes.

Here's how:

LEADERSHIP CREATES BLUEPRINT ACTION PLAN WITH A VISION

- Team focused on trust-building, setting clear goals, and commitment to action
- Multiple action steps outlined to seize timing opportunities when they arise
- Small changes early on bring small successes, building momentum
- Patient and methodical approach to change using "gentle action"

STATE AND LOCAL PARTNERSHIP REMAINS STRONG

- Philosophical alignment and early demonstrated support from state DHS leadership (G5)
- Quick, fluid, and forward movement results from high trust among state and local leaders
- Family-strengthening policies result from intentional feedback loop between local practice efforts and state administration

INTERNAL STRATEGIES TO PRESERVE AND STRENGTHEN FAMILIES

- Ongoing staff training presents opportunities for mindset shift to prioritizing family connections
- Parent Partner program expands to support more system-involved parents
- Child Safety Conferences avoid removal to stranger care for 90% of cases
- EISA senior leadership collaborate closely with senior leadership from other service areas

EXTERNAL STRATEGIES TO PRESERVE AND STRENGTHEN FAMILIES

- State Attorney General replaces County Attorney, supporting State efforts toward family-based approaches *(see page 2 statistics)*
- Provider contracts restructured to buy services reflecting prevention values and practice
- Family First Prevention Services Act leveraged for momentum toward family-based approaches
- Subject matter experts Annie E. Casey, Casey Family Programs, and Alia utilized for funding, training, and validating data

DATA APPLIED TO EVALUATE IMPACT AND INFORM PRACTICE

- Evidence-informed approach used to iterate, test, learn, adjust, and scale practice approaches
- Data metrics resistant to change become target areas
- Dashboards with outcomes on micro and macro levels inspire progress through data stories
- Comparing state data by region creates benchmarks and spurs best practice

OUTCOMES

Department of HUMAN SERVICES

NUMBERS OF DHS YOUTH IN CARE
4/01/18 - 3/31/21

29% decrease in number of youth in foster care (119 to 85)

38% decrease in number of youth in residential or group care (99 to 61)

28% decrease in child removals (1122 to 811)

EISA CHILD SAFETY CONFERENCES
10/01/18 - 9/30/20

426 youth involved in Child Safety Conferences

96% children remained in the care of loved ones after initial conference *(86% remained there safely 10 days later)*

CLINTON COUNTY ATTORNEY GENERAL
CHILD REMOVAL RATE COMPARISON

Clinton County youth removed FFY18 before AG **10.2 per 1000**

Clinton County youth removed FFY19 after AG **6.5 per 1000**

WHAT'S TO COME IN 2021

EISA continues to influence practice statewide; more children remain home and/or within their natural support networks.

Here's how:
- Kinship Navigator program expands statewide
- Financial support provided to relatives
- Child Safety Conferences expand statewide
- Attorney General placed in the Western Service Area

Eau Claire County, Wisconsin Department of Human Services
Evolving and Responding

1980 : Department of Human Services created

- Department of Human Services (DHS) forms in 1983
- DHS contracts with community partners to provide services

1990 : Increased need for services

- Uniroyal manufacturing closes in 1991
- Eau Claire County has the 2nd highest rate of poverty in the state
- Opioid usage increases in Eau Claire community

2000 : Increased pressure on service providers

- Costs rise for already-expensive emergency out-of-home placements like residential and hospital care
- Wait times increase for mental health and psychiatry services provided by community partners
- Services become mostly crisis response as high demand reduces provider capacity to deliver ongoing mental health services
- DHS contracts with community partners are cut due to increasing outpatient services pricing

2010 : DHS brings services in-house

- Diane Cable hired as DHS Director in 2016
- DHS Behavioral Health Division forms to provide direct services to community
- Internal continuum of care services provide early, streamlined, cost-effective support billed directly to Medical Assistance (MA)
- Earlier intervention leads to decrease in residential care and increase in kin care placements
- DHS staff able to respond as needed with variety of services
- Complexity of community needs remain high - 83% of child welfare cases are related to drug abuse

2020 : Early results of family-centered approach

- 40% reduction in residential care placements from 2019 - 2020, representing $800K reduction in costs

Eau Claire County, Wisconsin Department of Human Services
Evolving and Responding

Eau Claire County DHS outcomes
Between April 1, 2018 and March 31, 2020

59% decrease
in number of youth in residential care (27 to 11 youth)

46% decrease
in total number of youth in foster care (143 to 77 youth)

41% decrease
in number of youth placed more than 50 miles from their primary community* (27 to 16 youth)

Visitation with birth family is a strong contributing factor to reunification (even up to 10x as likely), so staying close is important.

In a new program targeted toward permanency for youth with the most complex trauma:

83% of youth
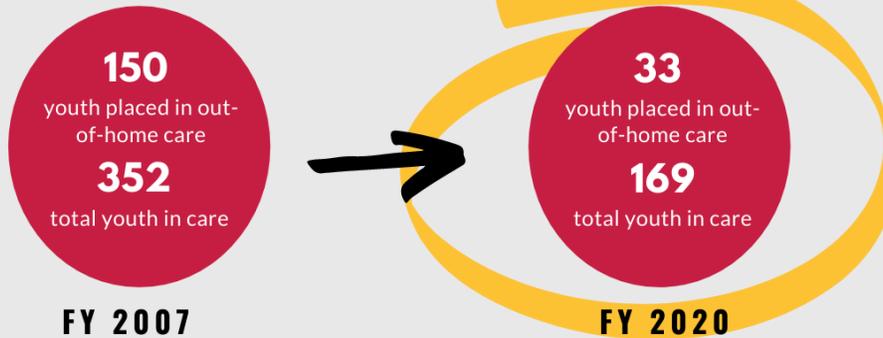moved to less restrictive settings within one year, and

100% of these youth
increased relationship connections

WASHINGTON COUNTY, MD
Department of Social Services
"Persistent Integrators"

150
youth placed in out-of-home care
352
total youth in care

FY 2007

33
youth placed in out-of-home care
169
total youth in care

FY 2020

HOW WE GOT HERE: Layers of progress and continual improvement

1
Steady focus on **family-centered practice** & reducing child removals since 2007

2
Teaming practice since 2007 involving multiple levels of inputs and decision makers

3
Focus on finding the right staff and supporting **worker wellbeing** efforts so they stay

4
Trauma Systems Therapy: deep dive to determine where we can improve our trauma-informed practice

5
"The answer is always yes" mentality to staff maintaining **community partnerships**

6
State-level efforts evolve to help solidify and support the work in Washington County

7
Focus on **wellbeing scores for kids** in care and consistently surpass state benchmarks

8
Family-centered mindset is internalized as what it means to work Washington County

9
2019 all-staff equity training leads to **de-identifiying demographic data** in child removal process

We've seen changes in...
Mindset: shifts in both staff and community partners
Process: expanding those involved in decision-making
Purpose: family preservation rather than removing children
Culture: practice deeply rooted in evidence and mindset shifts

WASHINGTON COUNTY, MD
Department of Social Services

Child and Family Outcome Highlights
From April 1, 2018 to March 31, 2021

74% decrease in number of child removals (43 to 11)

52% decrease in number of youth in foster care (79 to 38)

23% decrease in number of youth in residential or group care (35 to 27)

44% decrease in number of disrupted sibling groups (16 to 9)

36% decrease in number of youth placed 50+ miles from home* (39 to 25)

*Visitation with the birth family is a strong contributing factor to reunification (even up to 10x as likely), so staying close is important.

Appendix F

COHORT FAQ

Q: Were any policy changes made?
A: *At the state legislative level, no. Many agency-level procedure changes occurred, and some external partnerships were negotiated (restructuring service provider contracts, for example), but no policy change.*

Q: Did agencies change or increase funding sources to achieve their goals?
A: *No, but get your CFO on board with the vision. Work together with him or her to help you find funding to support the mission.*

**Q: How much did the Cohort leaders pay to be in the Cohort?**
A: *Nothing. Their cost to participate was covered, in travel and accommodation.*

Q: Will you be facilitating another Cohort?
A: *Like this? We have no plans to, no. However, we are working on other long-term, wide-scale transformation projects, so get in touch with us for a chat if you're interested.*

Q: How was the Cohort funded?
A: *The first year was funded by Alia through revenue from our fee-for-service technical assistance projects. The second year was funded by philanthropy.*
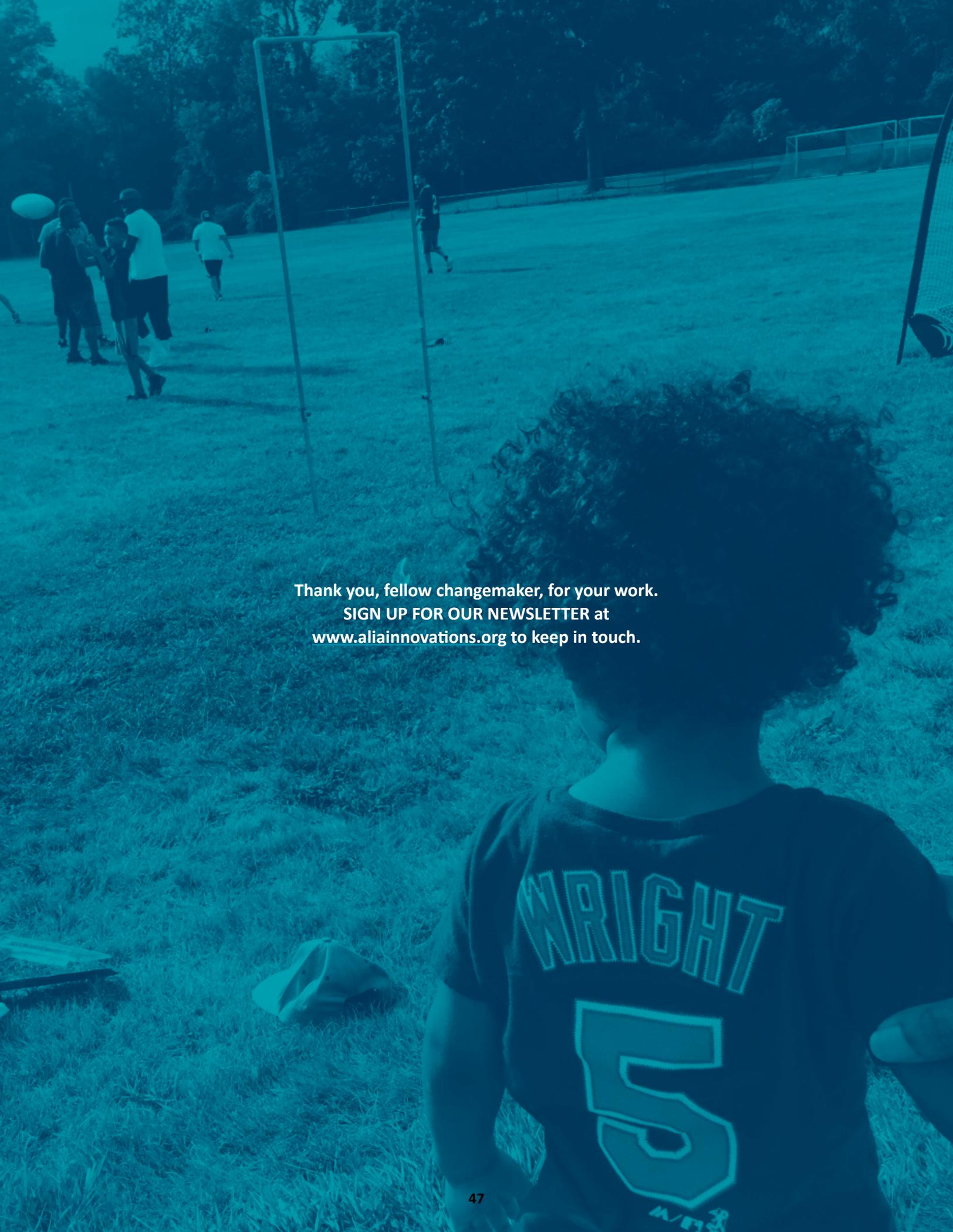
Thank you, fellow changemaker, for your work.
SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER at
www.aliainnovations.org to keep in touch.

LESSONS IN SYSTEM REDESIGN:
Alia UnSystem Innovation Cohort 2018-2021