

Wicked Problems Institute 2026

The Future We Shape Together: Real Solutions for Families in Changing Times

The agenda is designed with the social ecological model as a framework, beginning with the very center of the model - the hearts and minds of children, youth and families. We meet up with the realities and opportunities in front of today's generation, then overlay the current policy and systems context. From there, the focus is on ways states and communities can lean into community-based prevention to ensure there are clear pathways to well-being with support along the way. Our first day together, November 13, is focused on learning and processing, while the second day offers time to begin to translate knowledge into actions that can be taken individually and collectively.

Day 1, April 30

Ascension Ballroom, 2nd Floor, Marriott Orlando Downtown

8:00 – 8:30 Arrival and Networking

Please be at your table and ready to begin by 8:30. Your nametag and materials will be located at the table in the ballroom where you will join your multi-sector group for the day.

8:30 – 8:45 Welcome, Introductions & Convening Overview

8:45 - 9:45 Discovery Cycle #1: Centering the Experiences of Children, Youth & Families

The strength of families—and their connections to each other and their communities—is bedrock. The experiences and insights of family members are the first doorway to building pathways to well-being.

Connecting with Families and Their Experiences

- Valerie Frost, Sunlight
- Michael Huesca, Paternal Opportunities Programs and Services (POPS)
- Dony JeanCharles, Children's Home Society of Florida
- Derreasha Jones, Children's Home Society of Florida
- Shana King, Indian Child Welfare Law Act Center
- Meg Dygert, American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), moderator

9:45 – 12:15 Discovery Cycle #2: Neurodevelopment, Relationships, Experiences & Communities

Our understanding of how brains develop, how communities and systems shape experiences, and the essential role of relationships, offers a roadmap for change. As we experience major shifts in policies, financing streams, technology and the economy, what if we seized this moment to re-design systems, practices and programmatic interventions from this deeper understanding of how children, youth and families grow, connect and thrive? This two-part discussion invites us to pause and consider how the science of development, the wisdom of communities, and the power of relationships can lead us to windows of opportunity to do an even better job of building pathways to well-being.

Part 1: Influencing Systems Design & Practice

- Dr. Melanie Berry, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University
- Dr. David Willis, Thrive Center for Children, Families and Communities, Georgetown University; Nurture Connection
- Leslie Gross, Family Well-Being Strategy Group, Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Dr. Jessica Pryce, College of Social Work, Florida State University, moderator

Small Group Reflections, led by the Table Hosts

Break

Part 2: Bringing Vital Concepts to Life in Communities & States

- Laura Porter, ACE Interface
- Dr. Bob Sege, Center for Community-Engaged Medicine, Tufts Clinical and Translational Science Institute
- Bryan Samuels, Chapin Hall, moderator

Small Group Conversations, led by the Table Hosts

12:15 – 1:00 Lunch (Synthesizers convene in the Orange Room)

1:00 - 1:15 Welcome Back and Recap of Morning Themes

1:15 - 2:15 Discovery Cycle #3: Zooming Out - Policy & Financing Insights to Help Build What Comes Next

Change is a steady companion in today's landscape. This session takes a wide-angle view of the broader policy and financing picture to pinpoint important considerations and signal opportunities for transformation. The aim is to move out of the daily news cycle and into an examination of the ways new structures are emerging and how clarity about these realities can help us imagine and build what comes next: systems that are more connected, adaptive, and grounded in what children, youth, families, and communities truly need.

Shifting from Firefighters to Architects

Zach Laris, Child Welfare Wonk

Policy & System Opportunities for States and Communities

Miranda Lynch-Smith, Chapin Hall

Small Group Conversations, led by the Table Hosts

2:15 - 2:30 Break

2:30 - 5:00 Discovery Cycle #4: Community-Rooted Approaches to Prevention

Grounded in what we know from science about how people grow and thrive, this discovery cycle explores ways to build systems that support responsive relationships, strengthen core skills, and ease the stresses that overload too many families. It highlights frameworks, processes, and approaches that help build alignment among partners within and across communities, states and systems. The goal is to open up sightlines toward practical, community-rooted pathways to well-being—ones that honor family strengths, reflect shared values, and make connection and belonging central to how support is designed and delivered.

Perspectives, Frameworks and Tools that Build Alignment Across Community & State Partners

- Jerry Milner, The Family Justice Group
- Tameka Caldwell, National Family Support Network
- Shana King, Indian Child Welfare Act Law Center
- Gabe McGaughey, Institute for Child & Family Well-Being, Children's Wisconsin
- Katrina Lanahan, Bloom Works, moderator

Small Group Reflections, led by the Table Hosts

Bright Spots Showcase: Solutions That Are Working & the Insights They Offer

This interactive session invites participants to explore community-driven solutions taking root across the country and connect with the leaders behind them.

Prevention and family strengthening happen in many places—schools, neighborhoods, health settings, child care, housing, courts, and beyond. The showcase lifts up nontraditional partners and approaches to spark fresh thinking, establish new partnerships, and expand what's possible for building connected, community-based systems of support where children, youth, and families can thrive.

A listing of contributors is available in the Bright Spots Showcase document.

5:00 – 5:15 Wrap Up & Important Notes for Day 2

5:15 Adjourn

Dinner on your own.

CHSA staff and board members will be in the hotel bar/restaurant area for networking and to help form dinner groups and offer restaurant suggestions.

Day 2, May 1

9:00 - 10:15 Bright Spots Salons

Choose one Bright Spot Salon to attend. Each Salon will open with a brief recap of the featured Bright Spots in the room, followed by an interactive process to dive deeper into the lessons and insights gained through the work of these examples and the work participants are doing in their own communities/states.

Salon 1: Family Connection, Amelia Room

Family Engagement in Residential Placements (OR)
GRANDFamilies Program (UT)
SOUL Families (KS)
Your Case Plan (12 states)

Salon 2: Community Connection, Windward A Room

Economic Mobility Pathways (nationwide)
The Bridge Program (CA)
Canopy Anywhere (MS)
Family Keys (WI)
Family Success Centers (NJ)

Salon 3: Systems Change, Orange Room

Connected Communities - Thriving Families (MO)
Culture is Healing (nationwide)
Kin Licensing Standards (nationwide)
Opt-In (SC; also in KY, OR, DC)
Workforce Retention & Well-Being (WI)

10:15 - 10:30 Break

10:30 Vision, Goals & Scope of the National Child Welfare Center for Innovation and Advancement (NCWCIA), Ballroom

Eshawn Peterson, Community & Systems Insights Lead, NCWCIA
Jacob Schmitt, Peer Services Lead, NCWCIA
Christine Tappan, Executive Director, NCWCIA

11:15 Deep Dive Session Set Up & Transition, Ballroom

11:30 - 1:30 Delving into Wicked Problems

In these deep-dive sessions, participants will work on a design challenge together and generate solutions. The topics were selected from input gathered from attendees through the registration process.

- Developing alternative financing approaches to fund prevention, Laura Porter, ACE Interface, Orange Room
- Centering community insight and sharing power when designing changes - Miranda Lynch-Smith, Chapin Hall, Ascension Ballroom C
- Shifting from surveillance to support - David Kelly, The Family Justice Group, Ascension Ballroom A
- Strengthening community capacity, partnerships and community data systems to lead well-being efforts - Mary Chant, Connecting Communities-Thriving Families, Missouri Coalition for Children, Ascension Ballroom B
- Creating alignment and shared accountability across and among essential partners - Brenda McChesney, National Family Support Network, Windward A1
- Supporting and sustaining the child and family well-being workforce - Gabe McGaughey, Windward A2
- Unlocking the Potential of FFPSA, Meg Dygert, APHSA, Windward B Room
- Connecting key systems to prevent child welfare involvement among infants and toddlers, Darneshia Allen, Zero to Three, Amelia Room

1:30 - 2:30 The Future We Shape Together: Closing Reflections & Shared Momentum

We'll close the 2025 Wicked Problems Institute by coming back together to lift up the ideas, insights, and possibilities that have emerged over these two days. This is where threads connect—the sparks from deep-dive sessions, the takeaways from Bright Spots, and the bold “what-ifs” that point toward the future we can shape together.

2:30 Adjourn