



STRATEGY BRIEF

# SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

## What do first spouses say about **working to address child and family well-being?**

The spouses of governors (first spouses) are in unique positions to elevate and advocate for the importance of supporting child and family well-being in their states and within local communities. While they are not elected officials, first spouses are able to engage a wide variety of partners to support their causes, serving as valuable allies to child welfare leadership interested in collaborating with non-traditional partners, developing and implementing [upstream prevention](#) services, and [transforming the child welfare system](#).

States differ widely in the structure of supports available to first spouses, including whether the first spouse has an official role, staff, or a budget. Their personal and professional experiences also influence what first spouses choose to focus on. Some first spouses have no previous experience in public life, while others have a great deal of experience. Nonetheless, all can find ways to make positive differences in a manner that suits their interests, experience, and personality.

This brief offers the insights and shares the experiences of six current first spouses who have worked to improve child and family well-being in their states: Lauren Baker (Massachusetts), Tracey Quillen Carney (Delaware), Angela Ducey (Arizona), Donna Edwards (Louisiana), Susan Hutchinson



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(Arkansas), and Susanne Shore (Nebraska).<sup>1,2</sup> For more information about the specific work of first spouses in this arena, please see: [How are some first spouses promoting child and family well-being?](#)

## Personal connections

First spouses build on personal and professional strengths and interests when deciding what issues to focus on and how to address them. Serving as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), hearing about friends' childhood experiences with maltreatment, or observing family members adopt children from foster care have influenced the decisions of many first spouses to focus their work on child and family well-being.

Depending on the nature of their work, some first spouses may initiate partnerships with their state's child welfare agency. For example, soon after **First Lady Lauren Baker of Massachusetts** assumed her role, she requested meetings with leadership from the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families. This allowed her to get to know the commissioner and some of the deputies, and helped guide her work.

Child welfare leaders need not wait to be approached, however: they can personally reach out to and engage first spouses themselves, beginning with an introductory lunch (or similar type of meeting) as an occasion to get to know each other. Given the many issues and priorities competing for first spouses' attention, it can take several tries before a child welfare leader is able to get on the first spouse's calendar, so child welfare leaders need to be persistent. One first spouse suggested that child welfare leaders begin making connections with the spouses of candidates as soon as the primary election is over. Interviewed first spouses

Through the [Governors' Spouses' Program](#), the National Governor's Association provides opportunities for professional development and networking, including learning labs on a variety of topics of interest to current first spouses, including childhood hunger; information sessions on trauma, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and child welfare; and public policy.

also recommended inviting first spouses to observe and experience programming in person rather than inviting them to attend large events such as fundraising galas, as it is more impactful to see the work firsthand. Many first spouses have come to rely on the advice of their state's child welfare leader, and many child welfare leaders appreciate that first spouses lift up and celebrate their work.

## Advocacy and education

Given their position, first spouses have access to a wide audience. Priority areas that first spouses highlight are likely to be picked up by the media, further spreading their message. First spouses also are less constrained than elected officials when bringing attention to issues and are able to talk about them more freely, often at a personal level and in a way that is relatable for members of the community.

First spouses can raise the public profile of organizations that are doing effective work for children and families, which can directly or indirectly impact those organizations positively. First spouses also are in ideal positions to advocate and educate the community

It would be beneficial for (state child welfare leaders) to reach out to the first lady's office. The knowledge from (child welfare leaders) is huge. They can figure out how to get that spouse involved.

— DONNA EDWARDS,  
FIRST LADY OF LOUISIANA

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on issues important to them. **First Lady Susan Hutchinson of Arkansas** explained: “People want the first lady to talk. I talk about what it is like to live here and then I talk about the children.”

Child welfare leaders can support first spouses in their efforts to inform the public about children’s issues through a number of activities: deepening their understanding of child and family issues by sharing data and stories; providing connections to community organizations to learn more about on-the-ground work; and assisting with the development of effective messaging to further the first spouse’s priorities. Child welfare leaders have access to a great deal of data and information about child and family well-being in their state, including service strategies and priorities, funding streams and needs, and what is most needed to prevent entry into out-of-home care.

## Convening and connecting

While many community members and organizations already are doing good work to improve child and family well-being, they sometimes work in isolation from one another. First spouses can foster connections and encourage cross-system collaboration. **Former First Lady Tonette Walker of Wisconsin**, who focused on [reducing adverse childhood experiences](#), served as an [early convener and connector](#) of first spouses, galvanizing their interest in improving child and family well-being.

First spouses can convene and connect philanthropic partners, faith communities, and others with whom they have formed relationships, such as local children’s hospitals, food banks, and experts in the field. **First**

**Lady Tracey Quillen Carney of Delaware** says first spouses can “pass the microphone around” to ensure that a diverse set of voices is heard.

**First Lady Angela Ducey of Arizona** has worked with the [Governor’s Council on Safety and Empowerment](#) to mobilize the faith community in Arizona to support children in foster care. More than 9,000 children in Arizona have been served through [CarePortal](#), a network of churches aiming to safely prevent children from entering foster care and supporting youth in care by meeting their tangible needs.

**First Lady Donna Edwards of Louisiana** also views herself as a connector. She explains: “We don’t need to reinvent the wheel; we just need to be encouragers and connectors. So many people are doing so much work, but everybody’s working in silos. Previously, there was no connection because people were just working hard and doing everything they needed to do, but they were not connected.”

Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services Secretary Marketa Garner Walters points out the tangible benefits of the First Lady’s [Louisiana Fosters](#), a Louisiana First Foundation initiative that connects faith, nonprofit, business and service communities to partner with government to support children in foster care and their caregivers. “From the agency side, it was clear that we didn’t have enough human beings,” she said. “We were doing everything we could just to take care of the kids and we were not doing a good job being responsive to the foster parents. Building this network of nonprofits, churches, other faith-based, or for-profit

A child welfare leader could be tremendously helpful in that first year (to a first spouse) of learning how to be an effective advocate for children. It’s important to recognize what you don’t know and find the people who do know.

— TRACEY QUILLEN CARNEY,  
FIRST LADY OF DELAWARE

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organizations to support foster parents links the work of the department with the work of the foundation.”

### **Amplify existing work and partnerships**

Some first spouses design and implement new partnerships, while others strengthen and uplift those already in place. First Lady Baker developed Massachusetts’ Wonderfund — a nonprofit that works on behalf of children engaged with the state’s child welfare agency — out of a smaller existing organization. First Lady Hutchinson, having learned about the important work of children’s advocacy centers in Arkansas after being invited on a tour, has been promoting their work and advocating to expand them.

First spouses also can enhance existing programs by convening and connecting organizations that previously have not worked together. [Bring Up Nebraska](#) and [Trauma Matters Delaware](#) are examples

of collaborations that build on existing resources. “Honoring what’s already in place always seems to be a good starting point, and where we need to add things, we do,” says First Lady Carney of Delaware.

### **Planning for sustainability**

Recognizing that governors’ time in office is limited but that deeply entrenched issues affecting child and family well-being persist well beyond their terms, many first spouses plan for the sustainability of their work. Rather than referring to an effort as “The First Spouse’s Project,” they aim to promote community ownership of the issue and the solutions. **First Lady Susanne Shore of Nebraska** points to Bring Up Nebraska as an example: “We have never said that this is my idea or my project. We talk about it being something I support and that I partner with. But when it becomes ‘my project,’ it dies.”



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It was really important to me that as we evolved the organization and changed it, we did it in a way that was really smart, business-oriented, and sustainable. We're trying to make sure that these resources and opportunities will keep going no matter who the first lady is. The need will be there. We have to make sure that everything we do is sustainable. As long as we keep that front and center in our strategic planning, we won't start programs or deliver services that can't be replicated or scaled.

— LAUREN BAKER,  
FIRST LADY OF MASSACHUSETTS

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 This brief is based on interviews with Tracey Quillen Carney, First Lady of Delaware, Feb. 10, 2021; Susanne Shore, First Lady of Nebraska, Feb. 11, 2021; Angela Ducey, First Lady of Arizona, and Maria Fuentes, Director of the Governor's Office of Youth, Faith and Family, Feb. 26, 2021; Lauren Baker, First Lady of Massachusetts, March 22, 2021; Susan Hutchinson, First Lady of Arkansas, March 29, 2021; Donna Edwards, First Lady of Louisiana, and Marketa Walters, Secretary, Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, May 5, 2021.
- 2 Other first spouses also are working on issues related to child and family well-being but were not interviewed for this brief.

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